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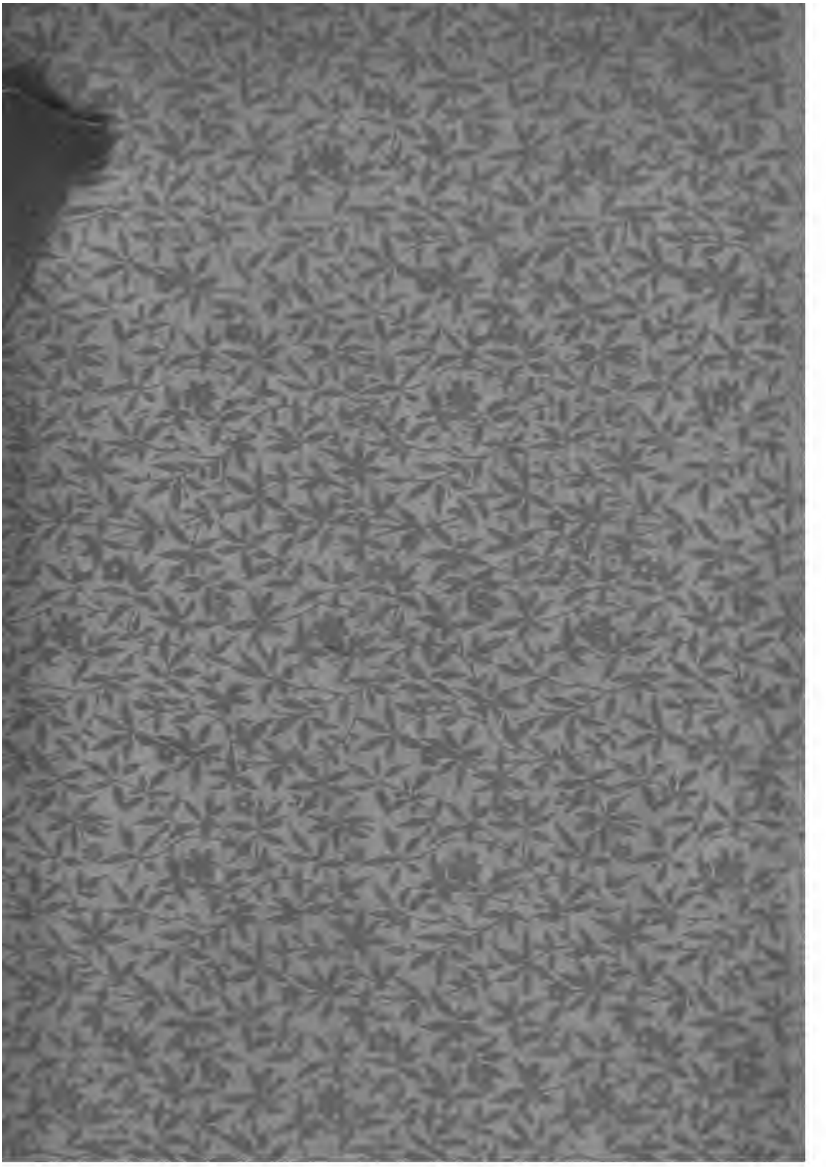

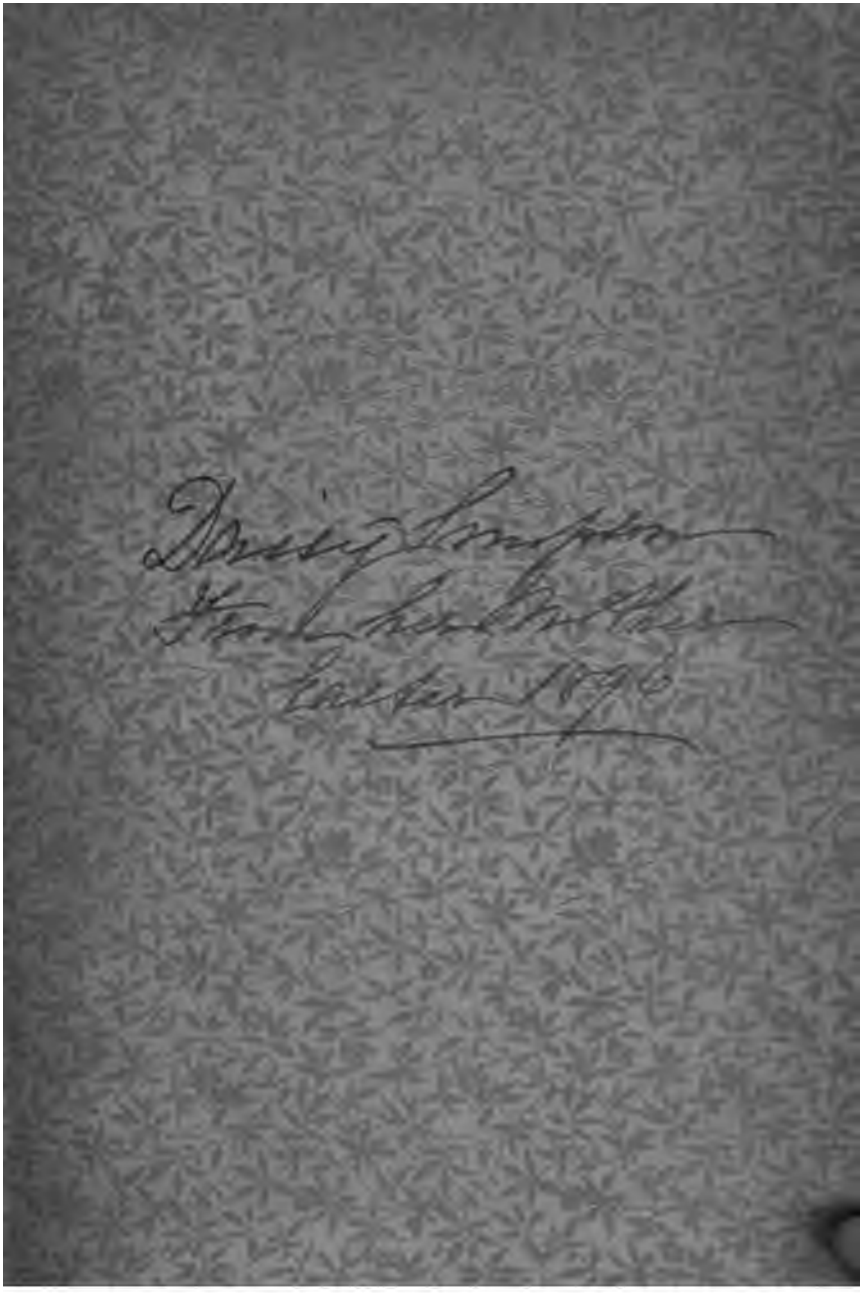

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An Uneventful Family Chronicle

BY

CURTIS YORKE

Author of "Hush," "A Romance of Modern London," "His Heart to Win," "Dudley," "That Little Girl," "The Wild Ruthvens," etc., etc.

"There comes to me amid the toil and fret
Of the long, busy day a picture sweet,
Without which life would never be complete —
Undarkened by the shadow of regret,
A dear old-fashioned face that charms me yet,
Smiling from soul unsullied by deceit,
Recalling happy hours which fled too fleet,
Crowded with memories I would not forget,
Brightening the misty canvas of the past."

S. H. P.

LONDON

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1895

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THE MEDLICOTTS.

CHAPTER I.

GRANDMOTHER'S ROOM.

"She is a woman; one in whom
The spring-time of her childish years
Hath never lost its sweet perfume,
Though knowing well that life hath room
For many blights and many tears."

J. R. Lowell.

IN Grandmother's room the dusk was falling. All over the rest of the house the lamps were lit, but Grandmother's room faced the west, and the daylight lingered there longer than in any of the other rooms.

In the square the trees had faded to ghostly quivering phantoms. The cry of the muffin-man sounded weird and pathetic, and told that autumn was threatened by winter. And the day was wintry

enough to send contented shudders through those who were not obliged to face its wild bitter wind and intermittent hail showers.

Grandmother was lying on a low couch near the fire, her dainty old face in shadow. Dainty seemed the only word to describe Grandmother. Her face, her hands, her clothes, and all her ways, held the essence of daintiness. Possibly she was more beautiful as an old woman than she had ever been as a young one. Some faces take the greater part of their years on earth to come to their full perfection. And to the adoring household in Bloomsbury Square it seemed that Grandmother grew more beautiful every day. For the sweetness of her soul shone out like a lamp, and drew all other souls towards it.

Grandmother was never lonely, though all her life was passed between this quiet rose-scented room and the bedroom beyond. She had never been out of doors since the long illness that had left her an invalid some years ago. And she never went downstairs. But "Grandmother's Room" was the accepted rendezvous for all the Medlicott family.

Not one of them ever seemed to contemplate for a moment that Grandmother would not be glad to see them. They knew she loved them, every one, collectively and individually; and that their sorrows and pleasures were just as much hers as their own.

No queen regnant ever held a more absolute reign over a kingdom than Grandmother; and though her subjects were difficult and unruly enough at times, she handled the reins of government with a light skilled hand that was as wise as it was loving.

"If God's anything like Grandmother," her grandson Garry had observed on one occasion in comparatively early youth—"I fancy Heaven'll be a nicer place than it sounds in church."

When this was repeated to Grandmother, her sweet blue eyes filled with tears. For we are never too old to be touched by the rough compliments of the boys and girls that nestle so close to our hearts.

Besides being the home of Grandmother—which would have made any room beautiful—Grandmother's room was beautiful in itself and in its belongings. It was long and somewhat low-ceiled, and had two large windows draped with heavy crimson curtains. There were lace curtains too, but even in summer, Grandmother liked to have the darker ones as well. Thus the room was always a little in shadow. The walls were papered with old-fashioned flock paper, also of deep crimson, which showed up in bold relief the valuable pictures on which the firelight was now shining fitfully. Grandmother was very proud of her pictures, and with reason. The furniture was all of oak, black with age, and here and there mirrors

reflected the pictures, and the rare old china, and the branched silver candlesticks that stood on the large cabinet facing the fire. There were two handsome old-fashioned screens in the room, for Grandmother was apt to feel chilly, and draughts to the old are as objectionable as restraint to the young. And there was always a fire, large or small, according to the weather. There were always flowers, too; and well-cared for plants that smelled sweetly but not heavily, stood about in great brass bowls that were at least a century older than any of the eyes that looked on them. All the new books and magazines found their way here. For Grandmother moved with the times, and took a keen interest in every question of the hour. In a dusky corner stood a fine old grand piano; for Grandmother loved music, and was quite an authority on the works of the best composers, old and new.

Just now Grandmother was knitting. She was nearly always knitting; and she knitted so fast, it was marvellous to watch her. Stockings and socks, shawls and bedroom-slippers, flew from Grandmother's never-tiring fingers with a rapidity that was almost inconceivable.

Suddenly an ivory cuckoo-clock in a corner announced the hour of six, and as the cuckoo flew in again, the door of Grandmother's room opened and a man came

in—a man with a quiet refined face, and a spare, well-knit figure. His voice, as he greeted Grandmother, was pleasant and almost caressing.

"Ah, Mr. Kingston," the old lady said, her eyes lighting up like a child's—"I am very glad to see you."

He drew a chair to the couch and sat down.

"You are not to call me Mr. Kingston any more, I think," he said. "You are to call me Roy."

She scanned his face anxiously.

"Something has happened," she said, a quick troubled note running through her kind old voice. "Is it—is it Gwendolen?"

"Yes," he answered, very low—"it is Gwendolen."

There was a pause.

"Will you have me for a grandson?" he went on, taking her hand and stroking it lightly.

Grandmother smiled; but her smile was a little sad. Kingston looked at her keenly.

"You are afraid we shall not be happy?" he said.

"My dear grandson-to-be, I hope you will be very happy," she made answer.

"You think," he went on slowly—"that I am not worthy of Gwendolen?"

For a minute Grandmother did not speak. Then she said gently,

"That was not my thought—no. I think any girl

might be very happy in your love. Gwendolen is very dear to me, and I have watched her grow up from a little child. She is unlike the others, and I don't think they understand her very well. What I am afraid of is—that you don't either."

Kingston laughed; and his laugh had the joyousness of a man newly engaged to the girl he loves.

"Who can say he understands a woman?" he answered. "If I don't understand Gwendolen now, perhaps I may, one day."

Grandmother laid her hand on his.

"Be firm with her," she said. "I need not tell you to be gentle with her; but don't let her see—as you have let me see—that you almost worship her. She wants careful managing. In the hands of the right man her character may develop into wonderful beauty. And oh, my dear boy, I hope and pray you are the right man."

"I should allow none but Grandmother to doubt it," he answered.

She looked at him, and her eyes were wistful.

"Have I hurt you?" she said. "I have perhaps said more than I had any right to say. But you seem to have been one of the family for so long, that I am apt to overstep my privileges."

"Dear Grandmother," he said smiling down at her —"I may call you Grandmother, may I not?—we

are all your lawful subjects, and you cannot overstep your privileges."

"You are going to dine and spend the evening?" she asked presently.

"Yes."

"Ah. You and Gwendolen will have much to say to each other," she said—"though you have seen each other constantly for so many years."

"Yes. I think, Grandmother, I have known her almost as long as you have. God bless her," he added, "I think I have always loved her."

Grandmother covered her eyes with her hand.

"Go to her now, dear boy," she said, "and leave me by myself for a little. I want to think it all over."

CHAPTER II.

SOME OF THE FAMILY.

"Thus woman rules the world. For her are wars; for her men spend their strength in gathering gains; for her they do well or ill, and seek for greatness to find oblivion. But still she sits like yonder Sphinx and smiles; and no man has ever read all the riddle of her smile, or known all the mystery of her heart."

BUT Grandmother was not given much time to think it all over. For the door was unceremoniously burst open, and a well-grown healthy young fellow of perhaps nineteen strode in.

"Well, Grandmother," he said in a boyish breezy voice—"have you heard the news? Gwendolen's engaged to Kingston. I say, won't she lead him a dance! By Jove, Grandmother—I thought I've had had a fit when I heard of it. Of course, anyone with half an eye could see he was gone on her. But I never dreamt they'd go so far as getting engaged. Fancy Gwen married! And to a man fifteen years older than she is. For I'm pretty sure Kingston's close on thirty-five, if he's a day."

"You are a wild boy, Garry," said Grandmother smiling placidly. "You will all be getting married one of these days. And when your turn comes, you'll find it no laughing matter."

"Pooh! Catch me getting married," he answered with a ringing shout of derision. "Batty and I are going to keep house together. She's not going to get married either. Ah, here she comes," he added, as a plump little girl of about fourteen came into the room. "I say, Batty, we're not going to make fools of ourselves like Gwendolen, eh? You're going to keep house for me until we're both as grey as badgers, aren't you?"

Batty nodded emphatic acquiescence to her brother's statement.

"Does Grandmother know?" she asked mysteriously. "Oh, Grandmother, don't you think Mr. Kingston is too old to be married?"

"Oh, rubbish, Batty," put in her brother. "A man's never too old for anything. Look at old Burton. He was sixty, if he was a day, when he got married. The thing is, Gwendolen's far too young to get married."

"Well, if Gwendolen and Mr. Kingston are pleased, I don't think we need trouble ourselves," said Grandmother lightly. "Come and tell me what you've both been doing to-day."

"Oh, I've been grinding away at the bank," answered Garry, making a grimace—"nothing new ever happens to me."

"And I've been to my classes as usual," said Batty. (In her extreme youth she had been called Matty; but having had an unfortunate cold in her head when asked her name upon one occasion by a visitor, the less attractive appellation had stuck to her, and she was never called anything else.)

"And the story?" asked Grandmother. "How is it progressing?"

"Oh, I've torn up the second chapter," Batty answered with a sigh. "Garry said it was rubbish."

"I should think so," observed that young gentleman scornfully. "Why, she made the hero go to hunt tigers in the north of Italy! Besides, the spelling was all anyhow."

"My spelling will go wrong," said Batty, with another and a more rueful sigh. "However, perhaps I'll improve."

"It's time you did," rejoined Garry. "You can get a hint from this swagger new governess who is coming to lick Clips into shape. Though if you ask me, I think it's all tommy-nonsense his not going to school like other boys. It's just an idea of the mater's. And governesses are such fools, and frumps besides. Here comes Gwendolen," he added in an undertone. "Let's slide."

Which they did accordingly.

The girl who had just come in was slim and tall, with a small, well-featured face, dark eyes, and a quantity of light faintly-curling hair. The eyes were restless, and the mouth was hard; but the face had undeniable charm.

Grandmother held out her hand to her.

"Come here, my dear, and let me congratulate you," she said.

The girl laughed.

"Congratulate me, Grandmother? Don't you think you should rather congratulate Roy? And yet, dear old fellow, I don't know that he is to be congratulated after all."

Then quite suddenly she flung herself upon her knees beside Grandmother's couch.

"Grandmother dear," she whispered excitedly, "have I done right, I wonder? Tell me. Tell me. You always know about everything."

"Done right, Gwendolen?" repeated the old lady anxiously. "I don't quite understand. You love Roy, and he loves you——"

"Roy loves me, yes. But—do I love him? I don't know. I don't think I do."

"Then, dear child, why promise to marry him?"

"Because I suppose I have got accustomed to his caring for me. I think that is it. When he stayed

away for all those weeks lately, I missed him so. And when he told me he could not come as he used to do unless I promised to be his wife, why then—why then——"

She stopped, and hid her face on Grandmother's shoulder.

"Child—don't you think you love him without knowing it?" whispered the old lady soothingly.

"I don't know. I am very fond of him. I always have been. But it makes me shrink away when he talks of love to me. And—and when he kisses me—it frightens me."

"Should you like to see him married to anyone else, then?"

"Oh, no, no. I couldn't bear it. Grandmother—it is only because I am so hateful. Whenever I want anything with all my heart, and get it, it always seems like nothing. Things I have hoped for, and waited for, and longed for, seem quite different when I really have them. Don't you remember when I was a tiny child and was allowed to choose my presents, I always cried afterwards, and wished I had chosen something else? I daresay if Roy were to die, or care for some other girl, I should go mad with grief. And yet now—to-night—Oh, Grandmother, do you think I shall ever know my own mind in anything? Do you think I shall

ever be good for anything, or be of any real use in the world? Ah, you are smiling. Why?"

Grandmother's smile was a very kindly one.

"I was smiling, dear, because for a moment or two you recalled my own youth."

"I? How? There could not possibly be two people more different."

"I was very like you once, Gwendolen. Perhaps that is why I understand you so well."

"I don't see how you could ever have been the unreasonable discontented wretch I am."

"Are you going to be unreasonable and discontented all your life, then?"

The girl sighed.

"Grandmother—I sometimes think it isn't all my fault."

"No, we never do think it is all our own fault."

"But I mean if mother would only have allowed me to have some kind of occupation, as so many other girls have. I get so tired of things. What's the use of spending all one's life in going to the houses of people one doesn't care a scrap for, and talking one's throat sore about things that don't matter? I hate it all. There isn't anything else for me to do, or anyone who really needs me. And when I am Roy's wife it will be just the same. It will be the old dreary thing in a new place. I don't

know how mother can be so placidly contented with such an empty meaningless life. I know father hates it. I know he's lonely many a time, and depressed, though he never says anything. The other night when mother had gone out to a party, and you had gone to bed—he always looks happy when he's here with you—I went into the library, and he was sitting alone, and he looked so grey and old, my heart ached for him. I longed so to put my arms round him and kiss him and say something comforting. But I didn't know what to say. Oh, Grandmother, do you think anybody is really happy and contented in all the world?"

"Not many," Grandmother said. "But then, as I was reading somewhere the other day, so much depends upon how we look at happiness—whether we regard it as a luxury, like a yacht or a million of money, which only a few fortunate beings possess —or as an indispensable adjunct, such as a nose, which it would be a reproach to be without."

Gwendolen laughed.

"How do you remember all these funny little things, Grandmother?" she said. "Talking to you is like reading *Tit-Bits* and the Bible alternately."

Here the door opened—the door of Grandmother's room was always opening—and Mr. and Mrs. Medlicott came in, the former a tall, tired-looking man of perhaps

five and fifty, with a refined face like his mother's; the latter a handsome, fashionably-dressed woman with dark vivacious eyes, and a face so kind that one knew her heart must be good. Yet one knew as instinctively that for her marriage had been a decided rise in the social scale. Behind them pranced a small boy of imp-like vitality and cherub mien. In his six years of life "Clips" (baptized Theodore) had never been tired and never been ill. If there were times when his idiosyncrasies made people feel both, it was not his deliberate fault, for he was the merriest, most loving little fellow in the world. He was the first to awake in the morning, his tongue was as enduring as his stout little legs, and his appetite for knowledge unappeasable. The family circle, therefore, was wont to hail the young man's bedtime with deprecatory relief.

"Grandmother—grandmother," he shouted, precipitating himself upon the old lady with a force which ought to have hurt her but which clearly didn't—"I've had my hair cut. Don't I look old? I'm never going to have curls again, and the man that cut it says I'll be having a moustache quite soon. And Gwendolen's going to be married and have——"

"There's the dinner-gong," put in Mrs. Medlicott. "Mother, how you do let these children worry you. Clips, come down, look how you are crushing Grand-

mother's lace. I'm going to have a long talk with you after dinner, mother," and with a blithe nod she sailed away.

Her husband waited until the sound of Clips' questions and Gwendolen's somewhat impatient answers had died out of earshot, then he bent and kissed his mother's forehead lingeringly.

"Has all gone well in the city to-day, my son?" she asked, letting her fingers caress his fast-whitening hair.

"Fairly, mother, fairly," he answered.

But he sighed; and his step, as he followed the others, sounded lagging and heavy.

Life was not always easy to Paul Medlicott, as his daughter Gwendolen had dimly begun to guess. And as Grandmother knew—had always known.

CHAPTER III.

DULCIE.

"Thou shalt by trial know what bitter fare
To other's bread; how hard the path to go
Upward and downward by another's stair."
Dante.

A COLD and depressed-looking young woman was being hurried London-wards by the Scotch express. At each succeeding station her heart sank lower.

This young woman had no romantic dreams about the great Babylon. To her it was only a vast unknown tract of dreariness, unlit by a single familiar face. The rain-swept Scotland she had left behind was dear and sweet with all her past associations. She still felt the bear-like farewell hugs of her harum-scarum brothers, the tearful kisses of her sisters; still seemed to see the love in "father and mother's" eyes, to hear the tremor in their dear voices as they bade her good-bye.

Now, Dulcie Lovell was not weak, nor was she

sentimental; and as she was twenty years old, she was clearly (though young for her age) old enough to be "sensible." But it was her first flight from the home-nest, a home-nest warm with love, if bare in the matter of loaves and fishes; and—strange to say in this age of female assurance and independence—she was shy. Shy enough, at least, to dread unspeakably the thought of being cast adrift in a houseful of strangers.

Besides—oh, prosaic truth!—she was hungry, though she did not know it. The plump packet of sandwiches and the flask of claret and water, packed by "mother's" careful hands, were untouched in the neat little travelling-basket. For she had had no heart for eating. Her feet were cold to iciness; for the apoplectic-looking old man who was her sole remaining travelling-companion had calmly appropriated the one foot-warmer.

At last—at long, long last—the lights of St. Pancras flashed into view. A curious qualm contracted Dulcie's heart as the train stopped with a jerk and the crowd of unknown faces on the platform met her wistful gaze. Had anyone come to meet her, she wondered. But no, it was not likely. At this point in her meditations the old man before alluded to walked over her feet and secured the only available porter. Dulcie collected her belongings and climbed stiffly

out upon the platform, where she stood shrinking nervously from the seething mass of people who all seemed so callously bent on their own affairs, and so indifferent to everything else. She made ineffectual grabs from time to time at the sleeves of passing porters, who one and all ignored her, and tore on their way like inferior Juggernauts, desirous, seemingly, of crushing all before them.

"By your leave, miss," said a gruff voice, and immediately a travelling trunk knocked her hat over her eyes, and sent her violently into the arms of a tall and rather severe-looking young man.

"I beg your pardon," gasped poor Dulcie, "I hope I have not hurt you."

The young man's face relaxed into a smile. For indeed he looked well able to sustain the shock of several such small bodies as Dulcie Lovell's without being either hurt or shaken.

"Not at 'all," he said raising his hat. "But I'm afraid that clumsy brute must have hurt you." Then he added with a faint inflection of doubt in his pleasant voice,

"Am I addressing Miss Lovell?"

"My name is Lovell—yes," she answered. "But how——?"

"How did I know? By the label on your travelling-basket. Then as you are Miss Lovell, and as I

conclude you are going to Bloomsbury Square, do you know that I have come to meet you?"

"Then you are——?"

"I am Brian Medlicott; and, if you will allow me, I will see to your luggage."

"It was very kind of you to come to meet me," she said, wondering if all London governesses were thus chivalrously treated by the sons of their employers.

"It was not kind at all. I knew you were coming by this train, and as I had to be in the neighbourhood, I thought you might find me useful."

"But how would you have known me?" asked Dulcie, looking puzzled.

"You forget. You enclosed your photograph to my mother."

"Ah, yes. She wished it. Do you think it is like me?"

"To a certain extent—yes," he answered. "Sufficiently so for me to hazard a guess at your identity, certainly. Now, will you remain here while I find your boxes?"

"I have only one box. It has a strip of red flannel tied above the label, so you will know it at once."

"A very sensible idea," he said approvingly.

Left alone, Dulcie breathed a sigh of relief. If all

the unknown and dreaded family of Medlicott were as satisfactory as this favourable specimen, her fears would all prove groundless. He was very much to be liked, she decided. And yet, kind as his face and voice had been to her, she had a sure conviction that both could be very much otherwise. This conviction deepened a few minutes later as she listened to his brief sharp orders to the porter and cabman.

As they drove along the lamp-lit streets, she scanned his face from time to time surreptitiously. She came to the conclusion that its chief characteristic was strength—strength deepening to possible cruelty. That his eyes and voice could soften wonderfully she had seen. And to her Scotch ears his voice held a nameless charm. In age he looked something under thirty, though at times his features assumed a hard expression that gave him a year or two more; and when they had traversed several streets in comparative silence, his companion decided that in spite of his present kindness to herself, he was a person to be feared and conciliated. Just as she had arrived at this conclusion he dissipated it by turning to her with a smile which changed his face magically.

"Is this your first visit to London?" he asked.

"Yes. It is the first time I have ever been out of Scotland."

He drew up the window, and it rattled noisily.

"Then I hope you will find the great city as pleasant as your anticipations of it have doubtless been."

She shook her head.

"I had no pleasant anticipations," she said. "I was prepared to hate London."

He noted that she spoke in the past tense; but she herself was unconscious of it.

"I hope I shall be satisfactory," she added with a sigh. "I have never been a governess before, you know. I have been a lady's companion, though."

"You look young," he said—"to be thrown upon an unknown London world."

"Oh, no. I am twenty."

"Twenty?" he returned gravely. "I should hardly call that a very great age."

After a pause she said,

"Will you tell me about my pupil? It is a little boy, is it not?"

"It is a little boy," he answered—"a very terrible little boy."

She laughed appreciatively.

"Oh, I am accustomed to terrible little boys," she answered. "You should see my brothers."

The cab stopped, and Dulcie's spirits fell to zero. But as she stepped into the warm luxurious hall they rose again. At twenty this transition is easy.

Mrs. Medlicott was coming downstairs, and Batty was close behind her.

"Ah, it is Miss Lovell, is it not?" the former said with an air of kindly patronage. "Glad to see you. We will have a talk in the morning, for I am just going out. Batty, take Miss Lovell upstairs and show her her room. Why, Brian, where have you been? We waited dinner for ever so long."

"I have been to meet Miss Lovell," he answered curtly.

Dulcie looked at him in surprise. Face, voice, expression, all seemed changed. Her opinion veered round again. She felt ungratefully certain she should not "get on" with Mr. Brian Medlicott.

As she followed Batty up, up to the very top of the house, she became conscious that she was exceedingly tired and hungry and dispirited. The room in which they at length arrived was small, neatly furnished, and commanding a view of oceans of tiles.

Batty closed the door, put her arms silently round Dulcie's neck, and kissed her heartily two or three times. This unexpected caress was too much for the full heart of the recipient. She sat down on the nearest chair, and burst into tears.

Batty looked at her in grave concern for a second or two, then went noiselessly out of the room.

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH THINGS LOOK BRIGHTER.

"Should fortune, with a smiling face, strew roses on our way,
When should we stoop to pick them up? To-day, my love, to-day!
But should she frown, with face of care, and talk of coming sorrow,
When should we grieve, if grieve we must? To-morrow, love, to-morrow."

DULCIE LOVELL, having indulged in a good cry, and feeling thereby much benefited, looked at her reddened nose and eyelids in dismay; for they shone out of her dust-blacked little face in a way much more vivid than becoming. After copious ablutions, however, she felt and looked a shade more presentable. So having coiled up her hair afresh and shaken out her gown, she opened the door and looked out.

Batty was leaning against the opposite wall, scribbling in a small note-book.

"You've been crying a good deal, Miss Lovell," she said sympathetically, slipping her warm hand into the governesses's cold one. "Why have you?"

"Because I was very silly," was the cheerful answer. "But I'm all right now, dear, and I'm going to give you back the kisses you gave me."

This ceremony performed, they went downstairs, and Batty remarked thoughtfully,

"I like you, Miss Lovell, and I'm sure Garry will too. We were so afraid you'd be horrid," she added with pleasing frankness.

As they got to the foot of the stairs Batty said with some curiosity,

"Did Brian meet you at the station?"

"Yes."

Batty was silent for a second or two, then she went on,

"I hope he wasn't—I mean I hope he was quite *nice* to you. He isn't always, you know."

"Nice? He was exceedingly kind."

"Oh, you needn't mind saying the polite thing," observed Batty airily. "We all know Brian. But wait till you see Garry. He *is* such a dear, and—oh, well, Garry is just Garry. Now before you have supper, we must go into Grandmother's room for a minute. She wants to see you."

As Dulcie followed her young guide into the quiet rose-scented room, a curious sense of having been there once before, long, long ago, came over her. She felt too, the unexplainable sense of rest that

seemed to pervade Grandmother's room. But when she met Grandmother's eyes, and clasped the soft, motherly, *understanding* hand—then Dulcie Lovell became at once Grandmother's slave and vassal, even as the rest of the household.

Grandmother looked the young girl through and through with her keen though gentle blue eyes, and became her friend there and then.

"You are very welcome, my dear," she said. "But I am sure you must be very tired. You have had a long weary journey."

"I am going to take her to have some supper," observed Batty. "We are all going to have it together in the schoolroom, Garry and me and Miss Lovell, because we've just come back from Chiswick and missed our dinner."

"Then I will not keep you," said Grandmother with a cheery little nod and smile. "You are both famishing, I daresay. So I will say good-night."

"Good-night," murmured Dulcie, feeling as if she stepped into a beautiful dream.

Batty carried her off to the schoolroom, where Garry stood in a comfortable attitude before a blazing fire. Having been introduced to the newcomer, he regarded her in evident though respectful amazement, and politely suggested that they should begin supper without delay.

When he had partially appeased his hunger, he laid down his knife and fork and exclaimed,

"I don't think I ever felt more floored in my life!"

Dulcie looked at him inquiringly.

"I mean about you, Miss Lovell," he went on to explain. "We've been mooning about, Batty and me, all down in the dumps, not knowing what old hag or young idiot was going to be sprung into the family to be a blooming nuisance all round. And behold! all our fears resolve themselves into a jolly girl like you. It's paralysing."

"It's better than if it had been the other way round," said Dulcie, showing her pretty teeth in a brief smile. "Besides, you don't know me yet. I'm not an old hag, it is true; but I have yet to prove that I am not a young idiot. Am I to give you lessons too?" she added gravely.

"By Jove! I wish you would!" exclaimed the lad, half in earnest. "I—really, you know, I wouldn't be any the worse for rubbing up my history, for instance, and French, and——I say, Batty, what are you giggling at?"

"You!" returned Batty with frankness. "As if Miss Lovell doesn't know you're taking a rise out of her."

"I'm not taking a rise out of her, miss. You're

getting too ready with your smart speeches. Oh, no, we're not quarrelling, Miss Lovell. You'll get accustomed to us, in time. I say, let's sit round the fire and talk. Or are you too tired?" This to Dulcie.

"Oh, no. I don't want to go to bed just yet."

When the table was cleared, and the fire stirred to a gentle red, Garry observed gravely,

"Now, Miss Lovell, this being the schoolroom is your domain. So—may I smoke a cigarette?"

"Of course," assented that undisciplined young person. "I love smoke."

Just then the door opened and a young man came in—a young man with sleepy blue eyes, regular features, and close-cropped brown hair. He looked about five or six years older than Garry, and there was sufficient likeness between them to indicate that they were brothers. Nevertheless, the features were totally different. For Garry's square honest face, with its determined chin and level-fronting grey eyes had nothing to say to Greek symmetry.

People were rather fond of affectionately alluding to Kenneth Medlicott as an awful fool; and as a matter of fact he was foolishly good-natured, foolishly credulous, foolishly sanguine, foolishly a score of things—though to do him justice, none of them more than foolish things.

When he and Dulcie had been made known to each other, he dropped into a chair with a sigh of relief.

"I thought you had gone to the Fitzpotts's crush," observed Garry.

"Beastly cold in my chest," answered his brother briefly. "And you all looked so cosy in here as I passed, I thought Miss Lovell might take me as an honorary pupil."

"What an uneducated family you seem to be!" said Dulcie gravely. "Shall I have to teach any more of you?"

"Mother says perhaps you will read French with me," put in Batty. "I'm an awful fool at French."

"You might take Brian in hand," suggested Garry. "He suffers from chronic 'swelled head.' A few lessons in self-depreciation might come in well."

"I thought your brother very kind and nice," said Dulcie, curling herself up in her chair, and thinking that after all governessing might have its compensations.

"Fancy his going to meet you!" went on Garry. "The Boss—of all people in the world, putting himself out like that. I haven't got over it yet."

"Was that why he didn't show at dinner?" inquired Kenneth with languid curiosity.

"Oh, I hope he got his dinner!" exclaimed Dulcie,

who having been brought up in a chiefly masculine family, knew what the dinner hour is to the male soul.

"You bet!" answered Garry, with an expressive grimace. "Catch Master Brian neglecting himself for long. I saw him having a proper feed half an hour ago. I say, Miss Lovell, I've seen you yawn twice. It's time you were in bed. Now don't you let Batty keep you up talking about her story. You needn't colour up like that, Batty, my girl. It's no secret that you *are* writing a story, and you know you were going to read the first chapter to Miss Lovell this very night."

"I wasn't!" declared Batty, almost in tears.

"But you will read it to me to-morrow, dear, won't you?" said Dulcie soothingly. "And meanwhile I'll take your brother's advice and go to bed, for I *am* tired and sleepy. Are you coming up with me, Batty? That is nice of you."

As the door closed, Garry observed with a judicial air,

"Now that's what I call a thoroughly nice young woman."

Kenneth smiled lazily.

"Yes, she's not bad," he assented. "Not a bit pretty, though."

"She's pretty enough," returned Garry with decision.

"If she'd been an out-and-out beauty, the mater wouldn't have had her here, you bet."

"Why not?" inquired his brother with half-shut eyes.

"In case you or Brian might fall in love with her," answered Garry grinning.

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH DULCIE FEELS AT HOME.

"Let us be like the bird for a moment perched
On a frail branch while he sings;
Though he feels it bend yet he sings his song,
For he knows he has his wings."

Victor Hugo.

NEXT day was Sunday, and the family of Medlicott went in detachments to various churches.

It was during service in the church of St. John the Evangelist that Dulcie made more intimate acquaintance with Master Clips, whom she had seen at breakfast-time, and before whose possibilities she had quailed. He sat next to her in the sacred edifice, and imparted to her audibly and irreverently his impressions on the proceedings.

Gwendolen and Batty, who were also present, remained unmoved, to Dulcie's surprise. She herself felt conscious of being one large blush, and murmured agonized entreaties to her small companion to be "good and quiet" until service should be over.

But Clips smiled patronizingly. Governesses, old or young, held no terrors for him—he who was hand and glove with all the policemen in the Square, and patronized the postman and Carter Paterson's van-man.

"You be quiet," he said kindly but firmly. "I've been in this church before, and you haven't."

On the way home he informed Dulcie that he considered her a very nice girl, but advised her not to talk so much.

"It's different a little boy like me talking in church, of course," he added. "Because *I* don't know any better. But grown-up people's another thing."

Dulcie listened in silence, somewhat dismayed by the many battles she foresaw with this self-satisfied "infant of the century."

After lunch the whole family adjourned, as was their wont on a Sunday afternoon, to Grandmother's room. Even Gwendolen and Kingston. For Grandmother's room was large enough and cunningly arranged enough for many *tête-à-têtes* to take place therein.

A thick fog enveloped Bloomsbury, and the room was almost in darkness save for the firelight, which shone on the walls cheerily.

Kenneth at once proceeded to improve his acquaintance with Dulcie. He had not put in an appearance

at the breakfast-table, it being one of his idiosyncrasies to partake of that meal in bed on Sunday mornings.

Garry had gone to the piano, and was playing what he called "scraps," with a subdued and masterly hand. For harum-scarum Garry had a passion for music, which Grandmother loved to encourage.

Brian, in a distant corner, had lit a shaded candle, and was absorbed in a book whose cover betokened antiquity. Gwendolen and Kingston occupied a far-away window. Mrs. Medlicott and Grandmother were discussing some evidently important matter in murmuring undertones, while Mr. Medlicott peacefully dozed near the fire. Batty and Clips had temporarily disappeared.

"What a delightful room this is," whispered Dulcie to Kenneth with a sigh of content.

"Yes it is," he answered. "When we were youngsters we used to call it Heaven."

"Ah, I like that idea. Why can't all old ladies be like old Mrs. Medlicott, I wonder?"

"My dear Miss Lovell, why can't all places be like Heaven? We shouldn't appreciate them so much, I suppose."

"No, I suppose we shouldn't; and yet, I don't know. However, I'm too comfortable to speculate on possibilities. Do you know that I have been suffering

from a series of unexpected shocks ever since I came last night?"

"No! Have you? What kind of shocks?"

"Pleasant shocks. You see I had an idea that you were a formidable and difficult family."

"Ah. We've to thank Brian for that, I fancy."

"No, indeed. He was the first shock. He was surprisingly nice; and it was so good of him to come to meet me."

"I should have come, of course, if I had thought of it," observed Kenneth, somewhat regretfully.

"Yes, I daresay. But you see, your brother did think of it."

"Do you mean to say you really like Brian?" he asked, looking at her with some curiosity.

"I liked him yesterday—to a certain extent," she answered, glancing across at the severe face lit up by the candlelight. "He hasn't spoken to me to-day, except to say good-morning."

"No, and very probably he won't speak to you for several days. He's a very good fellow, Brian—in the main; but he fancies himself so awfully, you know."

"I thought all men did."

"Well, perhaps we do; but most of us take a certain amount of pains to conceal it. Brian doesn't, thereby showing a certain amount of honest sincerity

which if I were not his brother, I should admire. By the way, do you know he intended going into the church?"

"No. Why didn't he?"

"Well, he's the eldest; and the governor wanted him to be with him in the city. So he turned his attention to shipbroking instead."

"But—don't you think that was rather fine of him?"

"I really never thought of it. I certainly shouldn't like it myself. Though I daresay I should have cut as good a figure in the city as I'm likely to do in law. But the trail of the serpent is over us all," and he closed his handsome eyes sleepily.

"Didn't you have enough sleep this morning?" inquired Dulcie maliciously.

"I never do have enough sleep. Grandmother sometimes lets me go to sleep here on a Sunday afternoon."

"Then don't let me be the cause of your deviating from your usual ways. Shall I give you a cushion, and cover you up with shawls?"

"Oh, it's all very well to chaff, Miss Lovell. But some people really do require more sleep than others. However, just now I'm not sleepy. I want to talk to you. How do you think you and Gwendolen are going to get on?"

"I don't know"—looking across at the shadowy couple in the window. "I've hardly spoken to her yet. Is she?——I mean——"

"Yes, she is," he replied with an amused smile. "If you mean engaged to Kingston. It only happened the day before yesterday; but we've all been amiably shutting our eyes to its imminence for months."

Just then Garry's music came to an end with a sudden discord, for Clips, who had entered unperceived, had climbed up the back of the piano, and manipulated a feather-brush skilfully and unexpectedly in the absorbed face of the performer. Upon which the latter enveloped him in a huge sofa-blanket and carried him out of the room.

"Miss Lovell," said Batty's voice close to Dulcie's ear—"will you tell me if there are foxes in Italy? I want to know," she added hurriedly, "because of my story. I'm not writing it to-day, of course. But I always think a chapter on Sundays, and write it out on Mondays."

"Batty—or the young Jesuit," murmured Kenneth. "That novel of yours is going to be a big thing, Batty."

"It isn't a novel," returned the author modestly. "It's a tale of foreign life. But about the foxes, Miss Lovell?"

Dulcie gave the desired information, and meanwhile Garry returned, minus Clips, and took a chair near Dulcie.

"I've a chum I think you'll get on with no end, Miss Lovell," he said, surveying her with boyish approval. "His name is Jim Venner. He's in Paris just now, and won't be back till after Christmas. He's an awfully decent fellow, and has nothing to do just now except enjoy himself, because he has a rich and jolly old uncle who wishes him so to do. He'll get a proper surprise when he sees you. He hates girls, as a rule."

"He doesn't hate me," observed Batty.

"My good Batty, I was speaking generally. Never turn a generality into a personality. You may have that remark for your novel, if you like. I won't charge anything."

At this juncture Clips' voice sounded clearly through the room—

"Oh, I say, Grandmother, Mr. Kingston's going to kiss Gwendolen, I do believe!"

"Clips, you little beast!" said Garry—"how did you get out of the boot-cupboard?"

Clips jeered in unholy glee, and stood upon his head against the wall.

Gwendolen, her head held very high, left the window, and went to the piano.

"I wish you joy of your pupil, Miss Lovell," murmured Kenneth.

"I like Clips," said Dulcie good-humouredly. "Come here, Clips, and sit on my knee."

With lightning celerity Clips complied, flung his arms round the girl's neck and kissed her.

"Are you married?" he inquired. "And if you're not, should you like to be?"

"No, I am not married, Clips, and I don't think I should like to be—just yet."

"I'll marry you when I grow up, if you like," the young man observed condescendingly. "Perhaps you'll be tired of being not married by that time. I daresay I shan't be quite grown up for a year or two. Gwendolen and Mr. Kingston are going to be married, and I heard nurse say that Brian was once going to be——"

"Oh, shut up, Clips," said Garry explosively.

Dulcie glanced across the room. But if Brian had heard, he took no notice.

The door opened just then, and a plump, pink-faced elderly lady popped in. "Popped" was really the only word that described her entrance.

Never was seen a happier, more gleeful personage than Felicia Medlicott. She was beaming now, as she beamed always, like the sun on a fair May morning. Even the fire leaped up to greet her with a sudden flash of welcome.

"Aunt Felicia!" exclaimed a chorus of voices in many keys.

"And an hour before her usual time, by Jove!" supplemented Garry with jocular affection.

They all crowded round her, and Batty seized her cap-basket.

Aunt Felicia always spent Sunday afternoons and evenings at Bloomsbury Square, coming all the way from the neighbourhood of Chiswick for the purpose. Snow, nor rain, nor fog, nor storms, nor heat, nor cold, kept Aunt Felicia indoors. She had never known more than a day's illness in her life, and was as hardy as a winter apple. She was well named "Felicia." Happy as the day was long, always. Always looking on the bright side of things. Always contented, always smiling. Indeed there was something almost tiresomely cheerful about this mercurial old lady. Even Grandmother felt her at times very nearly oppressive. Sorrow and care seemed to have mutually agreed to pass by Aunt Felicia, and for other people's troubles she had no manner of sympathy. She waved them aside in an airy way that aggrieved and scarified their owners beyond measure. She made the sufferers feel that they had nothing at all to complain of, and that as far as real trouble was concerned they were frauds. Therefore the careworn and the sorrow-laden shunned Aunt Felicia.

But the gay and light-hearted adored her.

As I have said, physical weakness was unknown to her, and she held the opinion that "giving way" was a matter of choice. Therefore she was not welcomed in sick rooms. But if you wanted a breezy, cheery, untiring, amusing companion, why, Aunt Felicia was "all there."

When she had buzzed all round the room, kissed everybody except Kingston and Dulcie, given Clips a box of caramels, and exclaimed against the semi-darkness of the room, she vanished as suddenly as she had appeared, Batty following in her wake with the cap-basket.

CHAPTER VI.

GWENDOLEN.

"To bear our fortunes in our own strong arms
Which now we hold at much uncertainty."
King Henry IV.

DULCIE soon fell into the routine of the household in Bloomsbury Square. Her duties, she found, were not onerous. Her small pupil, if something the reverse of docile, was intelligent, and as are most uncertain people and things, comparatively interesting. No one knew where to have Clips the ubiquitous, Clips the unexpected. His ways were devious and to be dreaded, and even the warmth of his heart did not altogether discount the general uncertainty of his personality.

However, as this small firebrand was graciously pleased to approve of his governess, and as his lessons, owing to his youth, were merely nominal, no battles-royal had as yet taken place between them. He confided to Grandmother that Miss Lovell was

a brick, and that he "didn't believe she was grown up at all, but only a little girl."

Dulcie read French with Batty every afternoon, gave a little assistance in light household duties, and altogether found her post a sinecure.

There had been a few days just at first, when she had been horribly homesick, and Grandmother's room had been a very Shiloh to her. Now she was homesick no longer, and her letters Scotland-ward were bright and cheery.

One night, somewhat to her surprise, Gwendolen, meeting her on one of the landings as she was going to bed, asked her to come into her room to have "a talk."

"We never seem to have had any talk together, Miss Lovell," she said. "And somehow, I fancy, we should be friends."

Dulcie's face grew pink. She was pleased; for she had fancied that Gwendolen was the one member of the family who did not like her.

"Put on your dressing-gown and bring your hair-brush," went on Gwendolen. "I always take half an hour to brush my hair."

Dulcie complied; and when the hairbrushing had gone on in silence for some minutes Gwendolen said suddenly,

"I do envy you, Miss Lovell."

Dulcie's hairbrush became stationary.

"Envy *me!*" she repeated. "But why?"

Gwendolen brushed vigorously for a second or two, then said,

"You are so free, so independent. You must feel so self-reliant, so proud of being able to make your own way in the world."

"No, indeed I don't," replied Dulcie. "I often feel very lonely. I would have given anything to stay at home with all the dear people, instead of going out again among strangers. As a rule, I don't like new faces. Here it is different, to be sure. I feel quite at home with you all already."

"Hadn't you a good time, then, when you were from home before?" asked the other.

Dulcie squared her lips in a way Gwendolen came to know better later.

"No," she said briefly—"I hadn't a good time."

"Why did you go then?"

"Because I felt I ought. There are so many of us at home, and all the boys to educate, and so much to do on so very little. I couldn't bear to stay at home and be a burden to poor father. He is a hard-working country doctor, you know, and not very well off." Then she added after a pause, "It seems so strange, Miss Medlicott, that you should envy me. I was thinking only to-day how very, very happy you must be."

"Do you mean because I am engaged?" asked the other with a curious smile.

"Partly. And you seem to me to have so many things to make you happy."

"I have not what you evidently have, and that is a contented disposition," was the curt answer.

"If I were quite contented I should not half envy you—which I do," said Dulcie with a little sigh.

After a pause Gwendolen said,

"I want you to be my friend. Don't think, please, that I'm one of the gushing order of young women. But I like you; and I haven't any particular friend I care about just now. I've quarrelled with them all. If it wasn't for Grandmother, I shouldn't exchange my deepest thoughts with anyone."

"But,"—remonstrated the other, surprised—"Mr. Kingston——"

"Oh, my dear Miss Lovell, you don't understand. You are like all the rest. Why is Mr. Kingston to be flung in my face every hour of the day—as he is? Because I have promised to marry a man, does it follow that I have no horizon beyond him? He is a good man, and I ought to be, and am, very proud of his love. But—oh, there is always a 'but' in everything. Do you remember what Thackeray says of that horrible little word? Listen then. I learned it off by heart:—'But' will come in spite

of us. 'But' is reflection. 'But' is the sceptic's familiar, with whom he has made a compact. And if he forgets it, and indulges in happy day-dreams, or building of air-castles, or listens to sweet music, let us say, or to the bells ringing to church, 'But' taps at the door, and says, 'Master, I am here. You are my master; but I am yours. Go where you will, you can't travel without me. I will whisper to you when you are on your knees at church. I will be at your marriage pillow. I will sit down at your table with your children. I will be behind your deathbed curtain.' That is what 'But' is."

"I consider that morbid," said Dulcie decidedly. "But Thackeray's work is often morbid. Nevertheless, I love it. You have a good memory, Miss Medlicott."

"Call me Gwendolen, please, and if I may, I will call you by your name. What is it?"

"Dulcie."

"Dulcie? It is a silly name. But it is sweet. I have a good memory, you say? Yes, I believe I have; and at nights, when I can't sleep, I repeat over and over pieces from authors that I am fond of."

"Don't you sleep well at nights?" asked the other.

"No. Sometimes I don't sleep at all."

She brushed her hair in silence for some time; then she said,

"I daresay you've found out that we're a queerly-assorted family. Grandmother is an angel. She really is. She understands everybody, and is in sympathy with everybody, and is sorry for everybody. If there's such a place as Heaven, Grandmother won't want much preparation. Then there's father —dear hard-working father. I often want to be foolishly affectionate to him, but somehow I never am. *He* couldn't do without Grandmother. And mother! Well, she is just like a good many other mothers, I suppose. She can be very good-natured, and she can be very hard, and she doesn't make things too easy for father."

Dulcie was silent, thinking of her own sweet unselfish mother, who made most things easy for most people within her radius.

"And there's Brian. Though he is my brother, I must say I think he is one of the most thorough prigs that ever lived. He gave up the church to please father, and ever since then, he has made himself into a kind of amateur supreme judge over all the family. And Kenneth? He's perhaps the best-hearted of us all, but he's such an easy-going good-natured goose that he is bound to come to

grief in some way. I really think Garry and Batty are the most interesting of the lot. They are both so happy-go-lucky, and reckless of anything except just what is happening. Clips is a demon, pure and simple. And I,"—she added bitterly—"I was always a failure, from the beginning."

Dulcie put out her hand impulsively.

"Don't say that!" she said, her voice deep and earnest. "You are misjudging yourself cruelly. If you had been a failure, I know Mr. Kingston would not care for you as he does. You don't know how beautiful his expression is when he looks at you. Don't be vexed that I speak of him. But he seems to me so manly, so true; and anyone can see that he almost worships you."

"Ah, yes, I know," Gwendolen answered, moving her head restlessly. "But—oh, Dulcie, I think men attract us more when we don't attract them. I suppose—perhaps when one is too sure——"

Dulcie laid both her hands on the other's shoulders.

"You don't love him!" she said in a breathless whisper. "You don't love him at all!"

"I do—I do——" began Gwendolen.

Then quite suddenly, she threw her arms round Dulcie's neck, and burst into tears.

Dulcie cried too. And thus their friendship was sealed.

CHAPTER VII.

STRAWS.

"Nor hath her knowledge of adversity
Robbed her of any faith in happiness,
But rather cleared her inner eyes to see
How many simple ways there are to bless."

J. R. Lowell.

GRANDMOTHER'S maid, Angela, had been so long in the family that she almost looked upon it as her own. She was tall, angular, and forbidding to the eye, and had seen between fifty and sixty years, thirty of which had been spent in Grandmother's service. Her temper was peculiar, and to be understood by none but Grandmother, who "made allowances." Dear Grandmother, she was always "making allowances." With her, there was a permanent excuse for transgressors, "because one never could know all the circumstances and conditions." The excuse in Angela's case was that she had had a lover in her youth who had deserted her, and so

soured her temper as nature had previously soured her face. Irreverent Garry had been known to commend the sagacity of this bygone swain; but Garry and Angela had always been sworn foes.

One snowy Sunday morning after Christmas Angela was brushing out Grandmother's hair. Grandmother had beautiful hair, silver-white, with a soft curl in it that a girl might have been proud of.

"I'm sure, ma'am," said Angela primly after an unwonted silence—"I hope all is going to be well between Miss Gwendolen and Mr. Kingston."

Angela was privileged, so Grandmother only said,

"I hope so, Angela."

The handmaid shook her head lugubriously.

"With due respect to all, ma'am, I fear it will end in nothing."

Grandmother smiled.

"You are apt to look on the dark side of things," she said.

"And if I am, ma'am, my sad career must be responsible." (Angela prided herself upon her choice of words.) "One who has suffered knows how to apprehend. And I cannot but notice that Miss Gwendolen is not so happy-looking as an engaged young miss ought to be."

"We must leave things to time, Angela," her mistress answered with a half sigh.

"Ah, time is a good physician, ma'am. But we grow old waiting for his prescriptions. I could wish that Miss Gwendolen were more easily understood. I doubt if she will ever be happy, in whatever lot."

Another pause. Then,

"Miss Lovell is a sweet creature, ma'am. I think Miss Gwendolen has taken to her. I hope the friendship may be blessed. Is your hair to your liking, ma'am?"

"Yes, it will do very nicely, thank you. I too am greatly pleased with Miss Lovell, and hope much from her friendship with Gwendolen."

Angela remained silent for some time; then she said,

"I think it my duty to mention, ma'am, that both Master Brian and Master Kenneth seem to find Miss Lovell very pleasing. Of course, she is no beauty; but she has a wonderful way with her, and her expression is as sweet as a child's."

Grandmother laughed.

"Why, Angela, you are quite romantic," she said. "I am sure my nephews would be amused if they heard you."

"No, ma'am, romance is passed from me. But I have eyes, Mrs. Medlicott, though I am fifty-seven next birthday, and not it would seem without charm,

for the man who manages the grocery establishment a few streets away, made me an offer yesterday."

Grandmother allowed no surprise to irradiate her features.

"That was very gratifying, Angela," she said gravely. "But I suppose you refused him?"

"Which I most certainly did, ma'am. Marriage is a delusion and a snare. While you're out, you can keep out, but when you're in, you're in till death or disgrace unlocks the door; and it's a door I'd rather be on the near side of. I hear Master Brian's step in the passage, ma'am. Will you go into the sitting-room?"

Brian was standing at one of the windows as Grandmother entered, but he came forward quickly to help to establish her on the couch near the fire. When Angela had gone, he drew up a chair and sat down. Most of the family (except Kenneth) had dispersed to different churches. But Brian patronized divine service but seldom.

Over Brian—who was her favourite nephew—Grandmother often puzzled and grieved, much as she did over Gwendolen, though in a different way. It was quite true, as his sister had told Dulcie, that he possessed many prig-like qualities, and that he criticized his family circle mercilessly all round when occasion arose. With his renunciation of his

desired profession, he seemed to have renounced many of its supposed attributes. But to Grandmother he had never changed. When he was alone with her in this quiet room he became once again the loving tender-hearted boy she had known in the old days, now so far away. He nearly always spent Sunday forenoons in Grandmother's room. He said no church was half so satisfying.

"You look tired, my dear," said the old lady, when he had remained for some time silent.

He looked up with a start.

"I am not specially tired," he answered. "Except so far as life is a tiring business generally."

"It ought not to be so to you yet, dear boy."

"It ought not to be—no. But, as Miss Lovell said yesterday, 'All that ought, isn't, and all that isn't, ought.' She's a sweet quaint little woman. She quite brightens us up downstairs. Even my father likes talking to her."

"She is such a thoroughly wholesome creature," said Grandmother appreciatively, "and as yet, I am glad to see, unbitten by the 'new woman' mania."

"Oh, the new woman," groaned Brian. "If that hybrid monster only knew it, she's nothing more than a warmed-up and badly-flavoured dish of the type of unsexed woman who has sprung up every now and then since earliest history. Why do we never hear

of the new man? Simply because men are contented to be as they were made. By the way, Miss Lovell is very amusing on the subject."

"Kenneth and she seem to fraternize very well," observed Grandmother quietly.

"Do they? I haven't noticed it." His tone was decidedly curt. "I fancied he bored her," he added.

"It is wonderful how she manages Clips," went on Grandmother; "and Batty's French has improved marvellously in the time."

"I suppose she's happy with us? Do you think she is?" said Brian carelessly. "Miss Lovell, I mean. I thought she looked this morning as if she might have cried herself to sleep last night."

"Ah, poor child, her favourite brother has been very ill. I know she has been terribly anxious about him."

"Poor little woman, I thought there was something," Brian answered slowly.

After a pause, he added,

"I asked her to go with me to evening service at St. Margaret's to-night. A man I used to know very well is to give the sermon. And I want to have Miss Lovell's opinion."

Grandmother pondered over this, for Brian was not wont to take anyone's opinion on things in general. But, being wise in her generation, she said nothing.

CHAPTER VIII.

BRIAN.

"Then I said: But if God there be, who made us indeed and is good,
What guide has He left for our feet to walk in the ways that He would?"
Lewis Morris.

"WHEW!" ejaculated Garry in the schoolroom after tea. "So you're going to church with the Boss, Miss Lovell! Ye Gods and little fishes!—aren't you afraid? Are you sure you know how to behave in church—in such company?"

"Going to church with Brian!" repeated Batty in tones of awe. "Oh, Miss Lovell, I am so sorry for you. I wouldn't go anywhere with Brian for *anything*."

"I'm not afraid of Brian," put in Clips, pausing in the act of draining the milk-jug. "Once he thrashed me, and I bit his leg. I was awful sorry afterwards, of course, and cried under the clothes in bed. And first thing in the morning I went into his room, and told him I was sorry, and he was real

nice and kind and let me watch him shaving. I love Brian. Don t you, Miss Lovell?"

"No, dear," Dulcie answered absently.

"Well, it's very unkind of you," returned the small inquisitor, "and I'll tell him not to love you."

"Don't be silly, Clips," said Batty in reproving tones. "Of course Miss Lovell doesn't love Brian. It wouldn't be proper. She only likes him."

"My eye! suppose you made a conquest of the Boss, Miss Lovell!" grinned Garry. "What holy joy for us all. By the way, Jim Venner's coming home to-morrow, and I've told him to come here first thing."

Here Brian himself appeared at the door.

"We ought to start in about ten minutes, Miss Lovell," he said. "Can you put on your bonnet in that time?"

"It isn't a bonnet, it's a hat," corrected the ever-alert Clips. "She put a new feather in it yesterday, and she looks real stunning in it. I say, Brian, she says she doesn't love you; and I think it's awful unkind of her. I said I'd tell you not to love her either; and Batty says it wouldn't be proper if she did love you. Why wouldn't it be proper?"

It is on record that Brian blushed with violence. But he only said quietly,

"You talk too much, my good boy."

Dulcie had already disappeared. She came back in a few minutes, looking very dainty in her big hat and smart little cape.

Brian was fastidious as to women's dress, but in this case his eyes expressed entire approval.

Now, Dulcie was just a little bit afraid of Brian, and to-night, she thought he looked specially unapproachable. They crossed the Square in silence, and it was not until they had reached Oxford Street that Brian relapsed into speech.

"I am anxious to know your opinion of my friend's sermon to-night," he said. "He and I were at college together, and I fancy he would turn out well."

"It is very nice of you to care for my opinion," she answered. "I'm not at all sure that it will be worth having."

"I will risk that. Nevertheless, I have found that in many cases your opinion is decidedly worth having."

Dulcie began to feel that it was possible that this young man might have been maligned by his too *exigeante* family. For it is soothing to have one's judgment deferred to by those whom we respect. And however one might judge Brian Medlicott, or however one might dislike him, one felt bound to respect him.

To-night, for the first time, Dulcie decided that he was beyond question very good to look at; and she fancied, that when thawed, he would be rather interesting to talk to. She had speculated a little about that past romance of his, hinted at by Clips, and found herself wondering if he would ever feel friendly enough towards her to tell her about it. And she felt sorry for him, because of his renounced profession.

Their conversation on the way to Westminster is hardly worth recording, as it consisted mainly of Dulcie's inquiries as to locality, and Brian's answers thereunto. Her *naïve* interest in everything amused him, and he rather exerted himself to be agreeable. And when Brian chose to be agreeable, he usually made a signal success of it. By the time they arrived at St. Margaret's Dulcie had come to the conclusion that he was not at all a man to be afraid of, but one to be studied, and possibly very much liked. Had she been a little older she would have known that to be an amateur student of one particular man is dangerous. It is apt to be pursued to the neglect of other studies, and to the detriment of the student's peace of mind.

Dulcie enjoyed that evening service. The sermon, it is true, disappointed her, but the music was exquisite, and besides, she was looking forward to [redacted]he walk home.

As they came out into the starlit dusk of Westminster, Brian said,

"Well, Miss Lovell, what do you think of Dent's treatise on morality?"

"It didn't make me think," she answered slowly. "It made me feel sorry."

"Sorry? Why?"

"It all sounded so dreary."

"I daresay you are right," he said after a pause. "I confess I am disappointed in Dent—not only in his matter, but in his delivery. He used to be a really brilliant speaker, and what he had to say was usually worth listening to."

"Why did he talk so about and against Buddhism, do you suppose?" asked Dulcie. "I was rather surprised. I think it is in bad taste to run down other religions. Buddhism always had rather an attraction for me," she added meditatively.

"Yes, to a certain extent it is fascinating. The doctrine of killing all desire and subduing the body entirely, not by fasting and penance, but by mental culture and never-ceasing moral reflection, holds fine possibilities. I don't know but what it is on a higher plane than our own code of ethics."

"It is so difficult to judge," she said. "More than two-thirds of the world, I have heard, hold by the tenets of Buddha and Mahomet; and the proportion of professing Christians seems fearfully small."

He looked at her in quick surprise.

"Necessarily. And the proportion of true Christians is smaller still. But that does not prove Christianity to be a failure, though I have heard it argued that it does."

"People are trying so hard to prove that Christianity *is* a failure," said the girl. "And I daresay you will be horrified if I say that to me the sort of Christianity most people practise is something very like a failure."

"I am not at all horrified. A religion of fear is dastardly, and must be a failure. And that is the Christianity most people practise who practise it at all."

"It seems so unjust to the Almighty," she went on earnestly. "If we are to look upon Him as a Father, why shouldn't we obey Him simply because we love Him, and not from fear of the punishment that may follow disobedience? Just as children who have a loving earthly father, could not willingly grieve him because they love him so, we ought surely to feel the same, only in a greater proportion, to our Heavenly Father. Why obey Him only to gain Heaven and escape hell? It seems so mean and degrading. Why can't we be good for the sake of being good?"

"You still believe in the orthodox hell, then?" he [illegible]d in a voice that chilled her somehow.

"Oh, I don't know what I believe," she answered impatiently.

He looked down at her with a curious smile; but he did not speak.

"You thought of being a clergyman, did you not?" Dulcie went on after a minute. "Forgive me for mentioning it. Perhaps I ought not. But I want to tell you that I am very glad you are not."

"Why?"

"Because I think it is a heart-sickening, miserable profession, when it is not hypocritical, and it is overcrowded already. And because I think you are the kind of man who could do so much more good out of the church than in it. Besides, you are true and honest and sincere now. But if you were a clergyman, you would find it difficult to be any of these things."

"You are shedding a new light on the clergy, Miss Lovell. Don't walk so fast, please, or we shall not have finished our discussion by the time we get home."

"I know a clergyman," went on Dulcie excitedly—"I suppose he is a good man, as men go—but I know he isn't honest in his preaching. I have never forgotten that once when I was a child, I heard him preach what seemed to me a beautiful, most earnest sermon. He spent the evening with us afterwards,

and my father told him how much he had enjoyed the sermon. And the man who had delivered it said, 'Yes, I took a good deal of pains over that piece of theology. Of course, none of us believe in miracles now-a-days, but we mustn't let our congregations suspect that.'"

"You are falling into the usual error of your sex," Brian answered, suppressing a smile—"of judging the many by the one. Your clergyman was only a solitary instance. I can answer for it that he is not universal."

"I don't think he is a solitary instance," she said determinedly.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"After all," he said—"what is a miracle? Take the old, old simile of—say, a grain of corn. You cut it in two, you examine it under the most powerful microscope without finding any indication of the life that is dormant there—the life that will awake and become active when the seed has been sunk in the earth for a certain time, under certain conditions. That is a miracle. But as it happens continually, and as we can calculate upon it, we call it a foregone conclusion. Carlyle reminds us that every child born into the world is a miracle. So with a thousand other things, all most wonderful, but familiarized to our minds by constant use and want. Things, never- [redacted] that are still miracles to the savage."

"You do not believe in miracles, then?"

"I did not say so. I don't see why one should not, however. If we believe in a God at all, how do we dare to say that it is not in His power to give us glimpses, if He choose, of such things as in a higher state of intelligence would be very every-day affairs? How do we dare to say that because our puny efforts do not and cannot affect the laws of nature that the God who is responsible for these laws may not—to our short-sighted eyes—break them? The wisest men, the most highly-cultured, the most deeply read in science and theology, are only beginning to dimly comprehend the mysteries that lie all around them. Their intelligence is only beginning to dawn. It can do no more—here. Can a philosopher adequately explain to his little child the pleasures of study and self-improvement, of the reading which instructs without amusing, of friendship, of the sacred union of two human creatures in marriage? He does not try, because he knows he cannot. His child's intelligence must grow up to these things. So must man's intelligence grow up to a full understanding of the mind of God And it cannot do that here. God has set us limitations. But it takes most of us a lifetime to recognize them."

"To be freed from oneself is what is meant by becoming a pure intelligence," quoted Dulcie.

"Ah, you read Schopenhaver?" he asked quickly.

"I can't say I read him. I have read a good many of his essays. I enjoyed them, and I hope profited by them. But I cannot forgive his bitterness towards his contemporaries."

"Bitterness towards one's contemporaries is a failing which I find it easy to condone," he said shortly.

"Why? I think it is both weak and a sign of conscious and admitted failure."

"Perhaps it is. But I think we agreed just now that more of us are failures than we care to count."

"I don't mean to be a failure," she said. "And—I don't think you will be one either."

They had reached home by this time, and Brian was opening the door with his latch-key.

"I have enjoyed our little talk," said Dulcie. "I seem to know you ever so much better now. And do you know," she added colouring a little—"I believe I had misjudged you."

Over this saying Brian pondered.

CHAPTER IX.

A CONFLICT OF WILLS.

"I question things and do not find
One that will answer to my mind;
And all the world appears unkind."

Wordsworth.

"I MOST strongly object, Gwendolen."

"But, Roy—why should you? It is not as if I were really going on the stage. It is almost like private theatricals."

"But it is not private theatricals. I repeat, Gwendolen, I strongly object to my future wife appearing on a public stage, to be criticized by a vulgar mob. I will not say I forbid it, because I prefer that you should give it up to please me."

"No, I can't. I think it is unreasonable of you. You treat me like a child—always like a child."

"Dear—to me you are a child. I sometimes fear——"

"What?"

"That the difference in our ages is too great."

"Yes? You mean you want to break our engagement?"

"Gwendolen!" he said in a deeply hurt voice.

"Well, it seemed as if you did. And after all——"

He turned and looked at her.

"Little girl," he said gently, and his voice was not quite steady—"do you care for me at all? Sometimes I am afraid that—you do not."

"Why did you ask me to marry you?" she exclaimed, with a petulant gesture away from him. "We were very well as we were."

"Gwendolen, you do not mean to be cruel, do you?"

"Oh, I don't know what I mean. How can you wonder that I don't look forward to our being married? It will always be like this. I shall always want to do things you don't approve of, and you will always be saying, 'Don't.' I hate that word. People have been saying it to me all my life."

Kingston sighed, a little impatiently. But his voice had a stern note that was new to Gwendolen, as he said,

"We need not keep up this undignified bickering, I think. I hope when we are married that there will be no question of diverse wills between us. But in this matter I expect you will defer to my wishes. If you do not—I shall understand."

"You will understand—what?"

"I decline to discuss the subject further. Even my patience has limits; and of late, Gwendolen, I think you will admit that you have tried it sorely."

"Well, you have the remedy in your own hands."

"I am aware of that," he answered coldly. Then glancing at his watch, he added,

"I am going out of town this afternoon, and may not get back for a day or two. I will write to you to-morrow."

He touched her forehead lightly with his lips, and before she could speak had left the room.

Gwendolen stood for a moment or two perfectly still. Then she let the pent-up bad temper of the last half hour master her thoroughly. Her small pale face grew unbecomingly scarlet. She clenched her teeth and shut her hands in an impotent fury that it was well her lover was not there to see.

"How dare he!" she actually sobbed in her rage. "Oh, I shall let him see I am not to be threatened and made a fool of. I hate him—I *hate* him. I shall never marry him, and when he comes back I shall tell him so."

A little later this whirlwind which called itself Gwendolen, rushed into Grandmother's room and peremptorily drove away Batty, who was inflicting upon Grandmother a thrilling chapter of her story.

"His ghastly record told against him now," the youthful author—who was nothing if not moral—was declaiming. "So our evil deeds——"

But she was unceremoniously torn from her seat and hustled out of the room.

"I want to speak to Grandmother," said Gwendolen excitedly—"so you must go away."

"What has happened, my dear?" asked Grandmother in an anxious voice, when the girl had sobbed passionately for a minute or two.

"Everything is the matter, Grandmother, and I wish I were dead."

This was a wish so peculiarly Gwendolen's that the old lady took no notice of it. She knew her wayward granddaughter always took things by the rough handle, and she was never surprised, to any great extent, by the subsequent storms. But she was grieved, for she foresaw more and more day by day, what a thorny path stretched before this undisciplined young creature who was so impatient of all control.

Presently Gwendolen said in the hard voice that always made Grandmother's heart ache,

"Do you see any harm in my taking part in Miss Wade's play at Ealing?"

"What play, my dear? I don't think I have heard of it."

"Well, Miss Wade has written a play. And it is to be performed at Ealing on Friday. And she wants me to take a little part—the part of a smart society woman. I shall only be on the stage ten minutes or so, and shall have hardly anything to say, only wear a lovely gown and look nice. The actress who was to have taken the part is ill, and Miss Wade thinks it would be such a nice chance for me. And it will save her paying someone else. You see, she is producing it at her own expense. Do you think there is anything to object to in the idea?"

"It is an idea that does not specially commend itself to me, for many reasons," said Grandmother slowly. "And I hardly think Mr. Kingston will like it."

The girl sprang to her feet.

"Ah, there it is!" she exclaimed. "Mother was just the same. Said she didn't object if he didn't. And father said so too. But of course Roy *does* object. Of course his frump-like mother and sisters would never think of doing such a thing—nice guys they would look on any stage!—and therefore his future wife must grow frump-like to match the rest of his family. But I won't—I won't! I shall do as I please, and if he doesn't like it he can marry a ready-made frump, and be happy. I wish he

would. I can't bear it any longer. I was always afraid I had made a mistake, and now I am sure of it."

"I think you are indeed making a mistake," said Grandmother ever so gently. "Oh, my dear child, be careful. Don't trifle with a good man's heart. Be warned by old Grandmother. Things once done are difficult to undo. Surely it is a little thing to give up what is after all, a comparative trifle, to please the man who is to be your husband."

"Grandmother—I know you are nearly always right. But this time I am sure you are not. If I give in now, I may as well make up my mind to give in always. And I'm not that kind of girl. It is different now to what it was when you were young. Women look at things from a totally different standpoint. It is absurd now-a-days to think a woman should let a man rule her actions simply because he is a man and she is a woman. As Miss Wade was saying yesterday, it is one of the exploded theories."

"You must please yourself, then, Gwendolen, my dear," said Grandmother with a tinge of hauteur in her tone. "I do not, of course, care to compete in worldly wisdom with Miss Wade."

At this point Clips entered in gorgeous array.

"Gwendolen, mother wants you to go down to th

drawing-room. There are three fat ladies in, and one thin man with an eyeglass. Oh, oh! I wish you saw your eyes! They're as red as fire, and your nose is all glazy. I'll bet you've been crying. What a baby! I say, if you slap me again, I'll kick you."

The door banged, and the combatants disappeared, the voice of their wrangling floating on the air.

Grandmother sighed, and turned to her book. It was the last new novel; but it did not interest her. Human books unfolded before Grandmother that were nearer her heart than any written ones could ever be.

CHAPTER X.

A WILFUL WOMAN.

"Ah, love, but a day,
And the world has changed!
The sun's away,
And the bird estranged;
The wind has dropped,
And the sky's deranged;
Summer has stopped."

Robert Browning.

"AND so you are Jim!" Dulcie Lovell was saying to a pale youth with light brown eyes and perpendicular red hair. "I have heard of you so often I feel as if I knew you."

"It's awfully nice of you to say so, Miss Lovell," answered Jim, his brown eyes growing appreciative and browner. "I've heard a good deal about you too. Garry's described you exactly."

"You are so like one of my brothers," went on Dulcie who had been pouring out the schoolroom tea with the earnestness with which she did most things, and who now paused to attack the buttered toast.

"Am I?" said Jim bluntly. "He can't be very like you, then."

"No. There are six of us, and we are nearly all quite different."

"Miss Lovell isn't as pretty as some of them," observed Clips, surreptitiously helping himself to sugar. "I've seen their photographs. One has eyes as big as—oh my, you should see them."

Garry, who had of late taken to patronize the schoolroom tea, frowned upon his small brother austerely.

"You're getting to talk a jolly sight too much, my young friend," he said with severity.

"That's what Brian says," acquiesced the delinquent calmly. "But I don't think I do."

Here Gwendolen put her head in at the door.

"Dulcie," she said—"after tea I want you. Will you come?"

She was in walking-dress, and her eyes and cheeks were brilliant.

"Yes," Dulcie answered. "We have nearly finished. Won't you have some tea?"

"No. I've just come from three afternoon teas with mother. Oh, Jim Venner, is that you? I didn't notice you. Garry has been like a fish out of water while you've been away."

Jim shook hands with her awkwardly. He didn't

get on with girls, as a rule. He thought them queer and fanciful, and too apt to "sit on a fellow," as he phrased it. Dulcie, however, filled him with secret amazement. She was quite different to the girls he had met hitherto. She was "jolly," he told himself, and if she was not exactly pretty, there was something nice about her face and figure that did almost as well. He felt quite sorry when she disappeared after tea, and almost worshipped her when she looked in again to say,

"If you and Mr. Venner would like a cigarette, you know, Garry, you may—if you open the window afterwards."

"That's a stunner!" Mr. Venner observed enthusiastically, as the door closed.

"No, she isn't. She's my Miss Lovell," said Clips at the top of his young voice.

"I just wish she was my Miss Lovell," observed Jim.

"I believe you," acquiesced Garry.

Meanwhile Dulcie had gone up to Gwendolen's bedroom. She found that young lady looking much excited.

"Look here, Dulcie," she began in a hurried undertone, "I want you to come down to Ealing with me. I am going to take the part of Lady George in Miss Wade's play. It's all right. Father and

mother don't object. But I don't want to go alone. So you are to come with me. We can get a train from Gower Street to Westbourne Park, and from there to Ealing. Get ready quickly, like a dear. Oh, I am to have the most lovely gown, the one Miss Clarence was to have worn. Do be quick, Dulcie. We have no more than time."

"You are sure your father and mother wish me to go?" Dulcie asked, quite interested.

"Would I say so if they didn't? *Do* make haste."

"Shouldn't we have had Garry with us?" said Dulcie in some dismay, a few minutes later, as they stood on the doorstep before plunging into the darkness.

"Good gracious, no!" exclaimed Gwendolen. "You don't mean to say you're afraid of being out in the dark? I'll look after you. What a country-mouse you are, my dear."

Dulcie said nothing. To her London at night seemed a forest of unknown pitfalls and awful possibilities. But as Mr. and Mrs. Medlicott appeared to have sanctioned the proceedings, she resolved to put her fears to sleep and prepare for enjoyment.

Without adventure they arrived at Ealing, and Dulcie was introduced to several very blooming young ladies, and a few frisky and facetious young men. Miss Wade herself was both refined and

pretty. It struck Dulcie that she looked worried and annoyed, which as a matter of fact she was.

When dressed as "Lady George," and got up in professional fashion, Gwendolen looked startlingly pretty, and was evidently quite aware of it, as were also the frisky young men. These latter merely glanced at Dulcie, who for her part was quite oblivious of them.

The play was a love-story, and our country-mouse was absorbed. Gwendolen had nothing to do except to look well, in which she was eminently successful.

The performance was over early; nevertheless when they once more got to Gower Street, Dulcie at least, was startled to find how late it was. But Gwendolen was too wildly excited to care.

"Wasn't it glorious, Dulcie!" she exclaimed as they careered down the street in the wind and rain.

"Lovely! And you did look beautiful!" returned the other heartily. "I suppose your father and mother would expect us to be late, wouldn't they?"

"Oh yes, I suppose so. Besides, I brought a latch-key. They won't know when we came in."

But as fate would have it, when they entered the hall they encountered Mr. Medlicott, and no less a person than Roy Kingston. At the sight of the latter Gwendolen uttered a quick confused exclamation.

"Oh!—you did not—I thought you were out of town!" she stammered.

He did not answer. He only looked at her. But there was something so peculiar in his gaze that Dulcie followed it. Then, in the strong lamplight she saw that Gwendolen had omitted to wash the paint from her face, and the darkening from about her eyes and eyebrows.

"Where have you been, Gwendolen?" asked Mr. Medlicott, contracting his forehead as he looked at her. "And since when have you set up a latch-key? And what, in Heaven's name, have you been doing to your face?"

An ugly look came into Gwendolen's eyes as she muttered,

"I have been to Ealing."

"To Ealing? And is that any reason for your coming home with your face painted like a third-rate actress? What is the meaning of it?"

His daughter preserved a sullen silence.

"Miss Lovell," Mr. Medlicott said sternly—"perhaps you can explain. Where has my daughter been, and what has she been doing?"

Dulcie's only answer was a look of dismayed reproach thrown towards Gwendolen, who exclaimed passionately,

"What does it matter where I have been, or what

I have been doing? I have not been doing any harm. Other girls' actions are unquestioned. Why not mine? I have been treated as a child long enough."

"I think you had better go to your room," said her father in a voice his children rarely heard from him.

All this time Kingston had not spoken. Now he simply bade the assembled group a brief good-night, and went out. Gwendolen turned and sailed upstairs in haughty displeasure. Dulcie was about to follow, when Mr. Medlicott detained her.

And just then Brian let himself in with his latch-key.

"Is anything the matter?" inquired the new-comer, glancing in surprise from his father's unwontedly stern face to Dulcie's flushed cheeks and trembling lips.

Now, poor Dulcie was feeling horribly frightened; and the coming of Brian was as an oasis in a desert.

"Oh, Mr. Brian!" she exclaimed, taking hold of his arm with unconscious force.

Brian looked at his father as if expecting an explanation.

"I have a little matter to talk over with Miss Lovell," said the elder man somewhat stiffly. "Will *you* come into the library, Miss Lovell?"

"Might I suggest deferring the discussion until to-morrow?" observed Brian, looking down at Dulcie with some concern. "Miss Lovell is looking very tired, and if she will forgive me, very much upset."

His voice was so kind, and Dulcie felt so bewildered and uncertain what to do or say in the circumstances, that she felt perilously near tears.

"I am very sorry," she murmured confusedly. "I—I did not know. I——" She stopped, her voice quivering.

Mr. Medlicott's face softened suddenly. And indeed it was seldom sternness rested there for long.

"I daresay Brian is right," he said after a pause. "We will speak of it to-morrow. I am sure there must have been some mistake in some way. There, there, don't think any more of it to-night."

After all, it was before Grandmother's mild tribunal next morning, that Dulcie made her explanation, what there was of it.

"I am afraid Mr. Kingston will be terribly vexed," said Grandmother when Dulcie had related the previous evening's experience, and screened Gwendolen somewhat to her own detriment. "I know he objected most strongly to this freak of Gwendolen's. I am surprised that you should have gone with her, when you knew her father and mother agreed with Mr. Kingston."

"I didn't know," the girl said quickly.

"Ah!"

And Dulcie knew that Grandmother understood. She seized the old lady's hand and squeezed it.

The door opened and Gwendolen herself came in, her head held very high, and her whole aspect expressing the word "Dangerous." In her hand was an open letter.

"Oh, you are here, Dulcie," she exclaimed, her voice hard and almost shrill. "Well, you will be interested in hearing my news. I have just had a letter, Grandmother. I am going to read it aloud. It is from Mr. Kingston. Don't go, Dulcie. There is nothing in it that you, or anyone, may not hear. Listen:

"'My dear Gwendolen,

"'Had you cared for me as I once hoped, I think you would have respected my wishes in the matter we spoke of on Tuesday. That you have not done so has cut me very deeply. I have seen for some time that you are not happy, and I fear that I could never make you so. I am thus forced to the conclusion that you were right in saying our engagement was a mistake. Therefore I release you.

"'Believe me, very sincerely yours,

"'R. KINGSTON.'"

"Now, is not that the most beautiful 'happening,' as Aunt Felicia would say? I have been racking my brains all night to find suitable words to let my lover down easily. And behold! by the first post the renunciation comes from him! Dulcie, why don't you congratulate me? Grandmother, why don't you?"

But both her listeners were silent.

Gwendolen rolled her letter into a ball, flung it up into the air and caught it again, then sat down at the piano and dashed off a brilliant waltz. When she had brought it to a triumphant conclusion with a few crashing chords, she found she was alone with Grandmother.

She ran towards her, and drew a footstool close to the couch.

"Why, Grandmother, you look quite sad. Don't you know I am delighted—yes, delighted!—to be free again? I feel a different girl. I have had a narrow escape, but I shall be more careful in future. And you are not to be sorry, Grandmother. I believe you are half in love with Roy—with Mr. Kingston—yourself. But you have still one granddaughter left for him. Batty would make him a nice, docile, malleable wife. Don't you think so? Oh, I am so happy!"

But her gaze fell before the sorrowful but loving look in Grandmother's eyes.

"Why don't you scold me?" the girl asked a little unsteadily. "I know you just feel like it."

"No, my dear, I don't feel at all like scolding you."

"But you think I was wrong about—about last night."

"I think—I am old-fashioned, you know—I think you were bound to respect the wishes of the man who was to be your husband. But if you had already made up your mind that he was not to be your husband, why then, I suppose allowance must be made for you, as far as he was concerned. I will not speak of your disregard of your father's and mother's wishes. In one way I think it better that your engagement is broken off. I certainly think it better for Roy."

"Better for Roy?" echoed Gwendolen in a somewhat offended tone. "Why?"

"My dear, we need not discuss it."

"You think—he is too good for me?"

"I think you unsuited to each other—at present."

"At present? Do you think I would ever——"

She broke off suddenly, her face crimson. Then she flung her arms round Grandmother's neck.

"Oh, Grandmother!" she half sobbed.

In another moment she was out of the room.

* * * * * *

Meanwhile Dulcie was superintending lessons in the schoolroom. That is to say she had already disposed of Clips, and was driving Batty through French moods and tenses. The latter was in a mood of seraphic stupidity. Clips, on the other hand, was animated by a spirit of unrest which took the form of impossible questions on subjects sacred and secular, and drove his preceptress to the verge of distraction.

It is indisputable that an ordinarily intelligent and speculative child of five or six years is capable of putting even a Q.C. through a cross-examination which, ten to one, will make the learned gentleman wish madly that he or his youthful interlocutor had never been born. And Clips was a fine healthy specimen of the abnormally inquiring infant.

For a brief space of time he had been silent, being engaged, indeed, unknown to Dulcie, in painting in colours fearful and wonderful the pictures in an old illustrated Bible which he had surreptitiously purloined from his father's library.

"Miss Lovell," he burst out suddenly, interrupting Batty who was droning through the verb *pouvoir*—"why have beasts got four legs and people only two, and worms none?"

"I don't know," was the brief but truthful answer.

"There weren't many things with only two legs in the Ark—were there?" continued the child in an

absorbed voice. "And the beasts would have taken up far less room if they'd only had two legs, wouldn't they?"

"Yes, I daresay," answered Dulcie absently. Her head ached, and she was feeling cross and out of sorts, and as if life, generally, was a mistake.

"I wish Adam and Eve had been in the Ark," proceeded the small philosopher. "I know they'd have enjoyed it. And it seemed a pity that when they were turned out of that jolly garden and everything, they shouldn't have just had one little sail to make up. Why hadn't they?"

Upon Dulcie's refusing to advance any opinion on the subject, the youth subsided for a time, while Batty made awful havoc of a French poem.

"Miss Lovell," began Clips again—"these old kings, you know, that are in picture-books, and that you said were dead years and years ago, are they in Heaven, do you 'spose? And if I go there when I die, shall I see them? And will they have their old crowns on, or the new ones it tells about in the Bible?"

"Oh, oh!" screamed Batty. "He's daubed paint all over father's grandfather's Bible. Oh, Clips, you *will* catch it."

"Oh, Clips!" exclaimed poor Dulcie—"what will your father say to me! How can you be so unkind and thoughtless!"

Clips hurriedly flung down his paint-brush, climbed upon Dulcie's lap, and burst into tears.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" he sobbed, squeezing her tightly round the neck. "I'll tell father it was all me. And I'll let him whip me as hard as he likes. *You* can whip me now, if you want to. I won't say one squeal—not one."

Dulcie kissed the remorseful little sinner, and proceeded to examine the desecrated Bible.

It indeed presented a curious sight, at which Batty giggled unrestrainedly. And even Dulcie, vexed though she was, could not suppress an unwilling smile on inspecting Abraham clad in what looked like a Rob Roy tartan bedcover, receiving two angels in mustard-colour, laboriously spotted with green, their bright vermillion wings edged with a broad black border.

As Garry observed later, it was quite the up-to-date school of art.

CHAPTER XI.

IN WHICH GWENDOLEN DOES NOT REGRET.

"Let no flower of the spring pass by us; let us crown ourselves with rosebuds before they be withered."—*Book of Wisdom.*

IT was Saturday afternoon, and Grandmother's room looked cosy and peaceful in the light of a glorious fire. Outside, the snow whirled merrily against the windows, and the wind screamed noisily.

The young people dropped in one by one as was their wont, and regaled Grandmother with choice bits of news. Garry and Jim Venner recapitulated for her benefit the greater part of a comic opera they had seen the night before, and the old lady laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks. Batty sat near the fire, scribbling a chapter of the famous story. Dulcie was busy with some sewing, and sat near the window to catch the waning light. Gwendolen had been out with her mother since lunch, and had not yet returned.

The door opened and Kenneth lounged in.

"Do you play chess, Miss Lovell?" he asked, as he ultimately came to an anchor beside her chair.

"Yes, I do," she answered, looking up from her work. "I believe I play it rather well."

"Then will you try a battle with me?"

"I should like it very much," she answered.

"We will take our little table over beside Grandmother," said Kenneth, when he had set the pieces. "She is a great authority on chess, and she loves to look on."

Kenneth played well, much better than Dulcie, from his languid looks and ways, had fancied he would. She herself was out of practice, and found to her annoyance that she was playing rashly and foolishly. Grandmother watched the game in silence. Garry and Jim watched it likewise, but less silently.

At last Dulcie lost her queen, and came within an ace of losing her temper as well. Kenneth offered to let her have the royal lady back again, but this magnanimity was indignantly refused. A bishop was then annexed by the enemy; and as Dulcie was reviewing her forces, Brian came in and stood behind her chair.

"Why don't you work both your knights, Miss Lovell, and corner his king?" said the new-comer. "You ought to checkmate him in three moves."

"Two to one isn't fair," murmured Kenneth lazily. "But I yield me with a knight's grace to a fair lady's petition."

"I haven't presented any petition," said his opponent with a quick frown. "And I'd much rather no one helped me. If I hadn't lost my queen so stupidly at the beginning, I should have been all right."

"There's always an 'if,' Miss Lovell," observed Garry, who was amusing himself by arranging Grandmother's rings alternately upon the old lady's fingers and his own. "'If I'd been you, and you'd been me, how very strange we both should be?'"

"That sounds like a poem—an esoteric poem, Garry," observed Kenneth, as he took one of his opponent's knights. "If you hadn't been a young scapegrace you'd have been a young poet."

"If I hadn't been a boy I'd have been a girl," announced Clips, emerging from temporary retirement behind the screen, where he had been cutting his hair after a fashion of his own.

"No you wouldn't, you'd have been an angel," said Jim, catching him up by the belt, "and that's what you're a long way off now, you little demon. Oh my eye, Miss Lovell, will you look at his hair?"

Dulcie sprang up quickly and the chessmen flew in all directions.

"Oh, Clips!" she exclaimed in a voice of such utter consternation that everyone laughed.

But Clips rushed to Grandmother, and buried his face in her lap.

"Oh don't let them laugh, Grandmother," he cried fretfully. "I wanted it to be like Brian's."

"By Jove, Brian, I hope you're flattered," grinned Garry.

Brian smiled absently, and drew the abashed Clips within his arm.

"It'll soon grow again," he whispered consolingly.

"I say," observed Garry to Dulcie a little later, when she had refused any further battles, and had left Kenneth and the chess-board to the tender mercies of Grandmother—"I can't think what's come to our beloved Boss. He's been as mild as milk lately. And I haven't had a lecture since I don't know when. I should say he's going to have an illness." Then he added more seriously,

"By the way, is there anything up between Gwendolen and Kingston? He hasn't been here for a jolly while, and I saw him in Chancery Lane yesterday, looking awfully down on his luck."

"I'm afraid——" began Dulcie.

"You don't mean that they've broken off the whole thing?"

She nodded silently. Garry whistled.

"Well, if you ask me, I think it's just as well," he went on. "These two would never pull together—in *this* world. Poor old Kingston, though. She's a queer girl, Gwendolen. I don't see through her much, myself."

"I don't think you understand her," said Dulcie slowly. "She can be very lovable."

"Oh, perhaps she can. If she could make it a shade more apparent, it would be well. As for not understanding her, I've observed that when people are generally crusty and disagreeable and impossible to get on with, they usually pose as being misunderstood. I think I'll try it on myself. I'll appear at the bank an hour too late, and go home an hour too early, and when remonstrated with by the powers that be, I shall reply with dignity, 'Sir, you do not understand me.'"

"How absurd you are," said Dulcie smiling in spite of herself. "I don't believe you could be serious if you tried."

"Can't I? You should see me sit through a burlesque in the theatre. That reminds me—Jim and I have got three seats for the Strand to-night; at least, he has. There's an awfully funny piece on. Should you like to come?"

"Oh, very much. But would your mother not object?"

"Oh, the mater won't mind. But let's ask Grandmother. She'll make it all right."

Grandmother smiled assentingly when her opinion was asked for. But Brian looked forbidding.

Afterwards, while Garry was playing dreamy music in the gloaming, Brian went over to Dulcie and said in a low voice,

"Miss Lovell, shall you think me impertinent if I ask you to reconsider your decision, and not go with these two boys to-night?"

She flushed up, and looked very much surprised.

"But why?" she asked, a little coldly.

He hesitated, then said,

"I don't consider two thoughtless young lads fitting protection for a young girl in a place of public amusement."

"I am very sorry that you do not," said Dulcie with slow distinctness. "But as Mrs. Medlicott has approved, I do not feel that I shall be outraging the proprieties."

Brian's face became exceedingly haughty.

"I beg your pardon," he said. And almost immediately afterwards he went out of the room.

Dulcie met the lazily-amused eyes of Kenneth, who presently took a chair beside her.

"Have you been having your first lecture from our law-giver?" he said. "Don't look so angry. You may be thankful you have escaped so long."

"I am not used to being lectured," began the girl hotly. Then she added, "But perhaps I shall have to get used to it."

"In this case however," said Kenneth, "Brian has some excuse for his solicitude on your behalf. The two young men in question took Batty to the theatre some time ago, and got into a row coming out. Some drunken man knocked against her, I believe, and was rather personal when remonstrated with. So Master Garry took the law into his own hands and punched the offender's head. A crowd collected, and altogether it was rather unpleasant. Poor Batty arrived home alone, breathless and weeping, and Brian was very eloquent on the affair for some days. In fact, Garry has not yet heard the last of it."

"Oh," said Dulcie in an utterly untranslatable voice. "It is very kind of your brother to be interested in my welfare. But I think—I can take care of myself."

* * * * * * *

As the days went on, Gwendolen appeared to be in the highest of spirits. She sang about the house, laughed and joked with her brothers, attended numerous social functions with her mother, and altogether justified Garry's statement that she had "taken a fresh start."

Her mother was unfeignedly pleased at the turn things had taken; for she had always secretly desired "something higher," as she phrased it, for her chic-looking daughter than Roy Kingston, who was, like Mr. Medlicott himself, "in business."

Mrs. Medlicott abhorred "business." (Her own father had been a pawnbroker in Cheapside.) The fact that Kingston earned his income, as his father had done before him, on the Stock Exchange, militated more against his eligibility in her eyes than if he had been the greatest libertine in London.

But Mr. Medlicott was both angry and grieved at the breaking of his daughter's engagement. He was deeply attached to Kingston, and missed his visits and his companionship more than he could have told. And he more than suspected that Gwendolen missed them too. He hinted this to his wife; but she only laughed good-naturedly. Mrs. Medlicott was nothing if not good-natured.

"Dear me, Paul," she said as she arranged her numerous bracelets (they were going out to dinner)—"you are growing quite romantic in your old age. Gwendolen isn't fretting—not she. She has an eye to the main chance, like her mother. And I'll be bound nothing's further from the girl's mind than regretting this break with Kingston. I'm more than pleased, I can tell you. For I've an idea that young

Donnithorne is rather taken with her. *That* would be a match, if you like. If his two elder brothers die, he'll be the next heir to his uncle's baronetcy."

"I would rather see Gwendolen in her grave than married to young Donnithorne," said Paul Medlicott quietly.

"Oh, it's all very well to talk of seeing people in their graves," returned his wife with a comfortable shrug of her ample shoulders. "But one likes to see one's girls have a prospect of settling in a titled family. It's not human nature not to. And if young Donnithorne has been a bit wild—and what young man of position hasn't?—why, he'll steady down fast enough when he has a wife and family of his own to look after."

"Have you any reason to suppose that Gwendolen cares for him?" asked Mr. Medlicott abruptly.

"You never can tell a young girl's likes and dislikes," his wife answered. "I fancy she would have him if he asked her. By the way, Paul, we must give a dance. I'm sure I'm ashamed to think of the hundred and one people we owe parties to."

"Are you going to give a hundred and one parties, then?" asked Paul Medlicott drily.

"Now, Paul, don't you get nasty. I've been a good wife to you, and a good mother to your children;

and you wouldn't grudge me anything I set my heart on, I know."

Paul Medlicott knew it too. And he sighed.

* * * * * * *

Gwendolen stood on the threshold of Grandmother's room. The door was ajar, and Grandmother's soft breathing mingled with the subdued flickering of the firelight.

The girl came in noiselessly and closed the door. Grandmother seemed to be asleep. The fire shone on her clearly-cut old face, and on the etching of "Love Among the Ruins," which hung over the couch. Gwendolen knelt down on the hearth-rug and remained quite still. She saw the fire blurred and dim, for her eyes were full of tears.

Grandmother stirred a little.

"I am not asleep, my dear," she said in her gentle voice.

Gwendolen turned away her head, but did not speak. Presently she began to hum a gay little tune. But it faltered, stopped and began again, then died away.

Grandmother's voice broke the silence.

"Gwendolen," she said, ever so tenderly—"will you come to me?"

The girl hesitated; then she rose and crossed the hearth-rug slowly. Her face was sullen, and almost repellent, and her eye-lids were reddened as if with much weeping.

Grandmother took one cold unwilling little hand, and said,

"Come and talk to me for a while. I feel lonely."

"Why, Grandmother," Gwendolen exclaimed surprised out of her gloom, as she drew a footstool close to the couch—"I thought you never felt lonely."

"Yes," the old lady said quietly. "I do—sometimes."

"You won't find me a very cheerful companion," returned her granddaughter, her mouth falling into unlovely lines again. "I don't feel lonely—but I feel wicked."

"Well, my dear, I have moments of wickedness too."

An unwilling smile parted Gwendolen's lips.

"That is too funny," she said. "I can almost as easily fancy angels playing cards as your feeling wicked. I think you are a saint, Grandmother. We all do. Even I—however bad I may be—never feel half so discontented and restless when I am here alone with you."

After a pause she added,

"Grandmother—I—I am much happier now—

than I was when—when I was engaged to Mr. Kingston."

"Are you, dear? You did not look very happy a few minutes ago."

"I see now," went on the girl—"that you were quite right in saying we were unsuited to each other."

"I said that I thought you were unsuited to each other just now," corrected Grandmother gently.

Another silence.

"Grandmother—I saw Roy—Mr. Kingston—in the street yesterday. And he looked—he looked ill."

Her voice trembled.

"Do you think, Grandmother, that he was very fond of me?"

"I should not put it in the past tense, Gwendolen."

"You think he is still? You think a man who cared for me would have written a letter like—this?"

She drew from the bosom of her frock the letter that we know of, crumpled with ill-usage, and worn with much reading.

"My dear child, it is not the letter of a man who does not love you, but the letter of a man who is bitterly grieved and cut to the heart. You don't understand Roy, and you don't know the depths of his nature. I know he is suffering cruelly. But he will never tell you so."

Gwendolen's face was hidden.

"Then—what am I to do?" she murmured unsteadily. "I—I can't ask him to forgive me."

"Why not?" said Grandmother, wisely ignoring her young relative's sudden veering round from a former point of view.

"How can I? He never comes here now, and I can't go to seek him. Fancy the triumph of his mother and sisters, if I did."

"You can write to him."

"But what could I say?"

"Say you are sorry."

"But I'm not!" flashed out the girl suddenly.

"You are!" said Grandmother in her quiet voice. The fair old face flushed a deep pink as she added,

"My little girl, if I tell you something about my own life—will you listen to me?"

"Ah yes, do, Grandmother. I'm so tired and cross, and—oh, what's the use of pretending? I am so—*miserable!*"

Grandmother's hand touched her hair.

"Poor child," she said half sadly.

Gwendolen laid her head down on the old lady's shoulder with a half sobbing sigh.

"You were going to tell me," she whispered.

"Yes, I am going to tell you what I have never told to anyone else——"

The girl raised her head quickly.

"Don't tell me if—if it would hurt you," she said.

"It would have hurt me once," Grandmother answered. "It cannot now."

She paused, then went on,

"When I was about your age, Gwendolen, I was engaged to be married."

"To Grandfather?"

"No."

"To someone you loved very dearly."

"To someone I loved very dearly."

"Ah, that was different. I never loved Roy very dearly."

"I did not know how dearly I loved him—this man—then. I learned it—later. Well, we had a serious quarrel."

"What about?"

"It does not matter, dear. It began about a mere trifle. But I was proud in those days, and hot-tempered. And so our engagement was broken."

"Did he break it off?"

"We broke it off by mutual consent. And it is the remembrance of the days that came after, that makes me so terribly anxious about you, my darling. Even now, when it all comes back to me, I feel so sorry for my past self, poor wayward thing. And I

had no chance given me to repair the evil I had done. When I saw him again—it was too late."

"He was—dead?" asked Gwendolen in an awed voice.

"No. He was married. He died some years later. And his wife became my dearest friend. And then I met Grandfather. He was a good kind husband to me, and we were very happy——"

The gentle voice stopped, and the bright blue eyes held a wistful look that seemed to speak of unseen things far away.

Gwendolen did not speak, but pressed her fresh young cheek against Grandmother's faded one. Her brothers would hardly have known wayward uncertain Gwendolen in this softened mood. Her eyes were dim with unshed tears, her mouth was tender and womanly, and on her lips lingered a half-born smile.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LITERARY LADY.

"Hang sorrow! Care will kill a cat,
And therefore let's be merry."

GWENDOLEN took Grandmother's advice, and wrote to her *ci-devant* lover. The answer was brief.

"My dear Gwendolen,"—it said—

"I received your kind little note, and trust you will not allow any hasty words you may have said during our last interview to cause you any further uneasiness. I think you will see that I am thinking entirely of your happiness when I say I consider it better that our engagement should not be renewed. I know it was only the goodness of your heart that prompted you to suggest it.

"With every good wish,

"Believe me, most sincerely yours,

"R. KINGSTON."

This letter Gwendolen showed to no one—not even Grandmother.

It was a terrible blow to her pride. And to more than her pride. It was a blow to the love she had just become conscious of—now when it was too late.

"Yes, he has written to me," was all she said to Grandmother. "And he seems to think as you do —that we are unsuited to each other. Please don't let us speak of it any more."

* * * * * * *

The same evening, when most of the family were assembled in Grandmother's room during the cosy half hour before dinner, Batty announced that she was about to read aloud the first chapter of the wonderful story.

Garry and Jim Venner, who had just come in, groaned loudly. Jim, I must mention, spent the greater part of his leisure time at Bloomsbury Square, and was regarded quite as one of the family.

Clips danced on one leg as Batty produced her manuscript, and exclaimed vociferously,

"It's a jolly story. I know all about it. Batty reads it to me after I'm in bed while I'm going to sleep."

The young author looked abashed at this public tribute, but seated herself within easy touch of Grandmother, and began:

"'Rome sat on her seven hills——'"

At this beginning Garry and Jim simply roared. When she could make herself heard, Batty explained in an injured voice,

"It means that the city of Rome is built on seven hills."

"Oh, oh, thanks, I didn't know," choked Garry. "Fire away, Batty—it's an uncommonly uncommon beginning. Sure to fetch the public."

"'Rome sat on her seven hills,'" resumed Batty—"'and the hero of my tale, Fabian Donizetti, starved in his garret.'"

"I rather like that," murmured Kenneth approvingly. "To kill the hero first go off is somewhat new."

"Oh, he doesn't die," said Batty, knitting her brows. "Does it sound as if he was going to?"

"Decidedly," put in Garry. "I thought it was in the style of the new tragedy trick, beginning at the end and working backwards."

"Well, I must alter it," observed the author. "I can say 'prepared to starve in his garret.'"

Brian, who was in a wonderfully gracious humour to-night, smiled as he stroked his moustache.

"There is something rather fine and stoical in

the phrase 'prepared to starve,'" he said. "Fabian promises to be interesting."

Batty looked across at him gratefully.

"'Prepared to starve in his garret,'" she proceeded. "'He was an artist.'"

"Ah," said Kenneth languidly—"in that case his preparing to starve was a wise precaution."

"'The sun had set in the west,'" continued Batty.

"Doesn't it usually set in the west in Rome?" inquired Garry. "I've never been there. Have you, Jim?"

"'In the west,'" said Batty severely. "'And the heavens were without a star.'"

"They should have tried the London music-halls,' interpolated Jim casually.

"'His melancholy eyes fell upon the floor,'" pursued the young author.

"And, quite by accident, he tramped upon them," added Jim.

"*My* eyes never fell on the floor," put in Clips, opening his own round orbs in deep thought.

"This was in Rome, Clips," said Garry reprovingly. "Queer things happen in Rome. And when you're there you have to do as the Romans do."

"'What object met his gaze?'" continued Batty, unheeding these jibes. "'Was it a moonbeam? No. Was it a diamond? Yes.'"

"Things are looking up for our friend Fabian," remarked Kenneth amiably.

"'It was a diamond,'" went on Batty—"'and for three days Fabian had not tasted bread.'"

"Very likely he had toast," mused Chips *sotto voce.*

"Was he going to make a meal off the diamond?" asked Jim.

"'The unhappy man reeled——'"

"Something stronger than bread had been his portion, evidently," murmured Kenneth.

"'And an awful temptation shook him. He would sell the diamond.'"

"He would be a flat if he didn't," interrupted Garry.

"'But even as he held the glittering bauble in his fevered hand, the door opened, and there entered with gliding step, the phantasmal ideal of his dreams.'"

"There entered *what?*" asked Jim with interest.

"Shut up, Jim," said Garry. "It's another name for indigestion. You don't swallow a diamond for nothing."

"No, that wasn't her name," put in Clips, with an air of superior wisdom. "It was Laura."

"Please don't laugh," said Batty, looking round earnestly; "because I've taken great pains with this part."

"Laugh!" echoed Kenneth in a pathetic voice. "I don't feel like laughing, I can tell you. I'm like Fabian, I'm starving. It must be nearly dinner-time. No—a quarter of an hour yet. Forge ahead, Batty."

"'The maiden glided across the floor——'"

"What maiden?" inquired Jim. "No maiden has been mentioned."

"Yes, don't you remember she came in?" said poor Batty with an impatient sigh.

"A phantasmal ideal came in," insisted Jim mildly but firmly.

"My good fellow, you forget," said Garry—"it is probably the Roman idiom for maiden. Proceed, Batty, and fear nothing."

"'Fabian,'" murmured the maiden—"'when, but now, I sat for my portrait to thee——'"

"I thought you said he was an artist, my merry girl," interrupted Garry.

"So he was."

"Then how did he come to paint portraits? Oh, I forgot. The poor chap was starving. Let it pass."

"'Sat for my portrait to thee,'" resumed Batty the long-suffering—"'I lost the diamond of my betrothal ring.' 'Thy betrothal ring?' echoed Fabian stupefied. 'I knew not of thy betrothal.' And after a minute he added, 'And I know nothing of thy betrothal diamond.'"

"But that was a fib, of course," condescendingly explained Clips to the company in general—"because he had the diamond in his pocket, and was going out to sell it whenever Laura was gone."

"Was he spoons on the phantasmal ideal?" inquired Jim politely.

"He seems to be turning out a cad," observed Garry. "Hurry up, Batty—you've only seven minutes."

"'As the door closed on the maiden's sylph-like form,'" continued Batty—"'Fabian sank to the ground in piteous agony.'"

"Had he swallowed the diamond?" asked Kenneth with languid amusement.

"'In piteous agony,'" went on Batty unheeding; "'He had told his first lie!'"

"Oh, now come!" put in Garry derisively. "That's a little too thin! How old was he?"

"About thirty."

"Then you bet he'd told swarms of lies," returned Garry with conviction.

"My dear Garry, that doesn't follow," said Grandmother, trying not to smile.

"Well, anyway, it wasn't his first," persisted Garry.

"Nor his second, you bet," added Jim.

"And I think I may venture to add—nor his third," supplemented Kenneth.

"Well, how shall I alter it?" asked the accommodating author. "I can't say his fourth lie. It would look silly."

"You can say he had told his last lie," suggested Dulcie demurely.

"But"—said Batty hesitatingly, and biting her pencil hard—"he has to tell another, later on."

"Why demoralize him in this way?" put in Brian in an amused voice.

"I am trying to make him uncommon," answered poor Batty. "I want it to be what they call an impressionist novel."

"What kind of novel is that?" asked Jim doubtfully.

"It is the kind of novel that gives you the impression that all the characters are fools," returned Garry conclusively. "I read one the other day, and the hero and heroine went mooning about all over the place talking the most appalling rot you ever heard of, and though they were madly in love with each other, went and married people they didn't care a straw for. She had high ideals, the book said. And I should say he had St. Vitus's dance, from the way he started, and convulsed, and shuddered, and sprang about, and went on generally like a galvanized Jack-in-the-box."

"Oh, Garry—I thought that a beautiful book," said *Batty.*

"Then you thought wrong. I could have written a better one myself. You take my advice, Batty. Write that chapter over again, and let impressionism alone. Send Fabian to the wars, or to the high seas, or even to Paris. But don't make him grovel on the floor because he told a cram; no man with an ounce of grit would do it. And don't make him steal from a woman, though he was starving, or preparing to starve, or whatever he was doing. And —ah, the saints be praised, there's the dinner-gong."

Batty sighed heavily, and wiped away a surreptitious tear. Then she gave her precious manuscript into Grandmother's care, and followed the others out of the room.

CHAPTER XIII.

A TÊTE-À-TÊTE.

"Nay, those two lovers were not anywhere;
If we were they, none knows us what we were."
Swinburne.

MRS. MEDLICOTT had decided to give a dance, and had persuaded her husband that it was absolutely necessary so to do. The date was fixed, the cards sent out, and the hostess-to-be was absorbed in the question of apparel. For this was a question that never palled upon her, and to which she gave more time and attention than she did to any earthly thing. Upon this occasion she had wavered for a whole morning between a handsome crimson brocade, "done up" with some old lace handed down through a previous generation of Medlicotts, and a gorgeous velvet gown of bright grass-green profusely trimmed with sequins. Gwendolen was to wear white silk with gold embroidery.

As Dulcie had no evening-gown at all—at least

none fit for such a grand function as this was to be —she dismissed the matter from her thoughts as much as might be. Grandmother, indeed, had suggested providing a suitable gown for her, but upon Mrs. Medlicott objecting very decidedly, had said no more on the subject.

Gwendolen was feverishly cheerful at this time, and seemed endowed with the faculty of being everywhere at once—and nowhere long. But Dulcie, who slept in the next room, sometimes heard sounds of muffled sobbing at night, and her tender heart ached for that other heart which had been its own undoing.

It was the evening of the dance, and Batty was much excited; for she was to appear in all the glories of a new frock which just touched the ground. If a slight tinge of regret pinched Dulcie as she flitted between the rooms of the two sisters, she stifled it very speedily, and heartily admired the finery she could not share. Both Gwendolen and Batty were honestly sorry that she was not to be present, but both naïvely agreed with her that it was better to stay away than appear in a shabby gown.

Garry and Jim Venner raged in disgusted amazement when they found they were to be "done out of" their expected dances with Dulcie, and scoffed

at the idea that a "girl's gown mattered." Even languid Kenneth protested, and looked really disappointed. They blocked up the schoolroom fire with their three stalwart forms, and grumbled with the exhaustiveness of their sex. Then they went up in a body to renew their grumbling to Grandmother, who smoothed their ruffled feathers in the sweet mysterious way peculiar to Grandmother. The dear old lady was not feeling quite herself to-night, and Angela the omnipotent had ordained that she was to go to bed even earlier than usual. Nevertheless, Grandmother insisted on inspecting all her darlings before "the party began."

Gwendolen was looking her best. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks glowed pink. On her, Grandmother's gaze rested longest and most wistfully. Batty was bubbling over with delight. Her one grief was that she had not been allowed to turn up her hair. But as Jim and Garry assured her she looked stunning as she was, she laid that regret aside.

Mrs. Medlicott looked very gorgeous, and very complacent. Her gown was becoming, and her diamonds were large. Therefore she was happy.

Grandmother and Dulcie, from the point of onlookers, thought the assembled family very good to look at. One of the family was not present, however, and that one was Brian. He was in

Liverpool, and had written to say that he could not return until the end of the week.

"What are you going to do with yourself, you poor little Cinderella?" asked Kenneth as they all trooped downstairs.

Dulcie laughed.

"I am going to write home. Then I am going to read a little. And then I am going to bed."

"Don't go to bed till the small hours," put in Garry. "And Jim and I will come in between the dances, and give you all the news."

The schoolroom—which, by the way, was at the back of the house and had once been a billiard-room—looked cosy and inviting enough as Dulcie sat down to write her home letters. It did not take so long as usual, for she was not in a mood for writing. Perhaps the gay dance-music distracted her.

When she had finished, she put away her portfolio, replenished the fire, and drew a low chair to the hearth. She had just dipped into the opening pages of "Marcella," when Garry looked in.

"How are you?" he said jovially. "Got a nice book? I say, Gwendolen is going it with Donnithorne. I can't stand that fellow. He puts on enough side for sixty. And I wish you saw Aunt Felicia. She's bobbing about as if she was fifteen. And there's an old fellow with a dyed moustache,

mashing her no end. I must be off. I've to dance with one of the Leslie women. She weighs about fourteen stone, and talks about nothing but high art. Ta, ta. I'll look in again when I've polished her off."

A little later Jim Venner appeared.

"Miss Lovell," he exclaimed eagerly. "Let's have a waltz here, if you don't mind—you and me. We can hear the music quite well, and I'll soon push the chairs and tables back."

But Dulcie laughingly declined.

"You are a dear boy to think of it, though," she added. "Are you having a good time?"

"Oh, fair," he answered, shrugging his broad young shoulders. "There aren't many girls I care about dancing with, you know," he observed after a pause. "Can I do anything for you, Miss Lovell? Shall I put some more coal on the fire? It's a beastly cold night when you're not dancing."

"No, indeed, you extravagant young man, the fire is beautiful. Go away and dance, or you will have all your partners coming here to look for you, and overwhelming poor me with the sight of their finery."

"By Jove, there's not one of them looks half as well," muttered gallant Jim as he took himself off.

Some minutes passed, and the door again opened,

this time to admit someone who was not in evening-dress—someone who looked tired and not in the best of tempers. He closed the door and came forward to the fire.

"Why, Mr. Brian!" exclaimed Dulcie—"we did not expect you until the end of the week. Have you come home on purpose for the party? You will be very late."

"No," he answered shortly. "I thought this affair was last night, and that I should escape it. I found I could get home a few days sooner than I thought I should. It's refreshing to find one place in the house not turned out of windows. I find my room is full of other men's coats and hats and umbrellas. I suppose it will continue so until well on into the morning."

He threw himself into a chair as he spoke, and closed his eyes wearily.

"Have you had any dinner?" asked Dulcie, who was a practical young person.

He sat up and pushed the hair from his forehead.

"No. I told one of the maids to bring me a plate of something or other here, as she said this was the only room in the house free of guests, except Grandmother's. I hope I am not disturbing you. How comes it that you are not among the dancers?" he added.

"Oh, I hadn't a nice enough gown to please my vanity," she answered cheerfully.

"Then why are you not in bed long ago?" he inquired with a smile.

"I'm not sleepy. And if I were I don't suppose I should sleep until the music stops. Mr. Brian, you look very tired."

"I am very tired and very seedy," he said shivering. "I've got cold, I think. And I'm afraid," he added almost boyishly, "that I'm in a bad temper."

A maid entered with a cold chicken, a plate of bread, and what turned out to be a pine-apple souffle.

"If you haven't had supper, Miss Lovell, will you share mine?" Brian asked pleasantly.

Dulcie assented at once, and he gave the necessary orders.

The young man was very silent during the meal. He ate but little, and Dulcie thought he looked ill.

When they had finished he drew up to the fire again, and stirred it into a rousing blaze. Dulcie held out her hand to say good-night.

"Don't go yet," he said. "It's not late—not twelve o'clock yet. The house won't be quiet for hours."

The girl hesitated, then sat down by the fire again; and for quite five minutes there was silence.

This evening was the first time Brian had spoken

to her with any degree of *bonhomie* since the night she had accompanied Jim and Garry to the theatre. She was still just a shade in awe of this somewhat self-sufficient young man. And yet—he interested her very deeply.

She was staring at him intently—quite unconscious that she was doing so—when his eyes met hers.

"What conclusion have you come to?" he asked half quizzically.

"What conclusion?" she stammered.

"Yes. You seemed as if you were trying very hard to solve some question in which my features were concerned. Do I remind you of anyone?"

"No. But I was thinking——" She stopped.

"You were thinking—what?"

"Oh, it was nothing special. I could not tell you. It was something I had no right to think."

"Something you had no right to think—and about me! You rouse my curiosity. Tell me."

A slight masterfulness was apparent in his tone.

Dulcie flushed resentfully. Then, fearing he might misunderstand, she said in a quiet voice,

"I thought—that you looked unhappy. And I wondered why."

He did not speak, but sat leaning his elbow on his knee, his hand covering his eyes.

The room was in semi-darkness, lit only by the

firelight, for the oil in the lamp had run low. A dreamy waltz murmured fitfully from the dancing-room. Dulcie felt unaccountably nervous, and wished Garry or Jim might come.

Presently Brian said in a low tone,

"You thought I looked unhappy?"

"Yes. Are you vexed with me? Please don't be. I—I couldn't help seeing it. And—you asked me."

"Yes—I asked you."

He did not move nor look up.

"You are strangely sympathetic," he said after a pause. "I think I should have resented anyone else's taking note of my moods."

Dulcie said nothing, and her companion went on as if to himself,

"I have seen a ghost. And the seeing of it has swept away old ideas and old fancies. And it has upset me."

Still silence. He continued under his breath,

"It was the ghost of a broken idol. An idol who ceased to be an idol long ago—for me."

"I am sorry—oh, I am sorry," she murmured.

He looked at her with a wonderfully softened look in his dark eyes.

"Are you?" he said gently. "It is very good of you to care."

The waltz had come to an end. The lamp went out suddenly. Dulcie rose to her feet.

"I must go now," she said. "I ought not to have remained so long. It must be very late. Good-night."

"Good-night," he said shortly.

He looked hurt, she fancied, as his face turned to hers in the uncertain firelight.

And she lay awake for an hour, wondering why.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WAY OF TRANSGRESSORS.

"The days and the months pace over us like restless little birds, and leave the marks of their feet backwards and forwards; especially when they are like birds with heavy hearts—then they tread heavily."

George Eliot.

A VERY pale and anxious-eyed Gwendolen came into Grandmother's room one morning about a week after the dance.

"Has anything gone wrong, dearie?" whispered the old lady, as her granddaughter bent to kiss her.

Gwendolen walked over to the window and looked out. It was a bitterly cold morning. A nipping east wind was careering cruelly through the square. Depressed and blue-nosed pedestrians struggled along with coat-collars well up and heads well down. Now and again a powdery snow-shower floated lazily earthward.

The girl shivered and turned to the room again.

"Grandmother," she said in a low voice, "Roy is

very ill. Father told me last night. He has been ill for nearly a fortnight."

Grandmother did not speak. She looked keenly at the girl's averted face, and her own face grew very tender and compassionate.

"It is typhoid fever," went on Gwendolen desolately. "And the day before yesterday they thought he would die. I have been lying awake all night—thinking——"

She stopped, with a queer little choked sound like a sob.

"Grandmother," she said indistinctly—"what should I do? I have thought until my head swims. He was always so kind and good, and when I was ill last year——"

"Come here to me, my darling."

The girl came slowly, and seated herself in the low chair that always stood close to Grandmother's couch. It seemed to invite confidences; perhaps that was why so many were made there.

"Dear little girl," crooned Grandmother, stroking the curl-crowned head that buried itself in her cushions. "You have been very unhappy. Why have you not let me share your trouble? You know Grandmother is to be trusted, don't you?"

Gwendolen twisted her hands together without speaking. Then she whispered unsteadily,

"I love him, Grandmother."

"Yes, dearie," murmured the old lady, her voice ever so gentle.

"And he doesn't care for me any more," went on Gwendolen with a piteous catch in her breath.

"You are wrong," said Grandmother. "I am sure you are wrong."

"If I could have gone to him," sobbed the girl.

"Why should you not go to him?"

"I—I don't suppose he would see me."

"He would at least know that you had gone to ask for him."

"He would not care. You don't know what a cruel letter he wrote to me when I wrote to tell him I was sorry."

"Never mind."

"You—think I ought to go?"

"I think you ought to go."

"But—mother will not be pleased."

"I will make it right with mother."

"Oh, Grandmother, how dear and sweet you are! And how you always smooth down everything. What should we do in this house without you?"

"Don't go until after lunch, like a good child," said Grandmother, squeezing the hot little hand, "and wrap yourself up well. Poor wee woman, you have had a miserable night, I can see by your eyes. But

don't fret. It will all come right by-and-bye. I feel sure of it."

But Gwendolen felt drearily certain that it would not all come right.

She could not touch anything at lunch, and got ready to go to Regent's Park with an unruly lump in her throat that threatened to choke her. The cold had intensified since the morning, and heavy snow was falling. It seemed an eternity before she reached her destination.

The somewhat gloomy house appeared to frown upon her with cold disdain, as if it knew she had no longer any part or parcel in its fortunes.

She waited for a long time in the once familiar drawing-room. It felt cold, and looked cheerless. The newly-lit fire was smoking sullenly.

At last the door opened and an old lady came in. With her entrance the day seemed suddenly to become darker, and the room colder. She wore a plain black cashmere gown, made voluminously but unfashionably. Her hair was parted flatly over her forehead, and surmounted by a severely unbecoming widow's cap. Her face was long and gaunt, and round her eyes were the red rims that tell of watching and weeping.

Gwendolen stood up and held out her hand nervously.

"How do you do, Miss Medlicott," said the elder woman, in an exceedingly below zero tone.

A slight flush had risen to her wrinkled cheeks, and she merely touched the girl's hand with the tips of her mittened fingers.

"I—I came," faltered poor Gwendolen. "I—we were anxious—I only heard last night—about Roy—Mr. Kingston——"

She stopped, horribly afraid she was going to cry.

"Pray be seated," said Mrs. Kingston frigidly.

Gwendolen obeyed, and went on, her voice trembling,

"Will you tell me how he is? I—I have been so—so anxious—since I heard."

"My son is very ill," Mrs. Kingston said quietly, though her eyes grew dim. "Indeed, the doctors fear——"

The girl interrupted her with a low sobbing cry.

"Ah, don't say he is dying," she burst out despairingly. "Oh, I knew it. I felt it. I have had such a terrible night——"

She had risen, her young face white as death, her eyes wild and haggard.

Mrs. Kingston looked at her strangely.

"I am surprised," she said, with an involuntary softening of the voice. "I did not think you were interested in my son's welfare."

There was no answer, and she went on, stiffening again,

"I understood from my son that all was at an end between you."

The mother's vanity was sore yet, as she looked at this girl who had supplanted her in her son's love, and then played shuttlecock with the heart she had stolen.

"Yes—so it is," returned Gwendolen wildly. "He —he does not care for me now. But—but——"

Here the poor thing broke down, and burst into agonized weeping.

Mrs. Kingston rose and came over to her.

"I do not understand," she said uncertainly.

But the girl suddenly took hold of her with a desperate clutch that was absolutely painful.

"Can't I see him?" she sobbed. "Oh, for pity's sake let me see him!"

And then—neither knew exactly how it happened —the two women found themselves sobbing in each other's arms.

"It was all a foolish mistake, then," said Mrs. Kingston, when some minutes had passed. "You do care for him, Gwendolen?"

The only answer was a tightening of the girl's arms. But Roy's mother understood. For her heart was more tender than her face, and she was

softened by the grief and anxiety and cruel suspense that dangerous illness always brings in its train.

"I'm afraid you cannot see him," she said, stroking Gwendolen's heaving shoulder with a somewhat awkward hand. "But I shall tell him you came. Shall I?"

"If you like," came the whispered answer.

"Should you like to see the girls?" asked Mrs. Kingston presently.

"No—oh no. They would see that I have been crying. I will go now. And may I come another day?"

"Come whenever you please, my dear. You know I looked upon you as my daughter, some time ago. Perhaps that time may come back again."

"Is he—is he still in danger?" faltered Gwendolen with wistful eyes.

"The doctors said he was no worse to-day," Mrs. Kingston answered evasively. But she sighed.

Gwendolen went out into the blinding snow and bitter wind. She felt wretched. It seemed to her a foregone conclusion that Roy should die.

If she had only been kinder to him, her poor aching little heart kept repeating. It is the sort of thing hearts repeat too late, as a rule.

* * * * * * *

"Come into the Park, Dulcie," said Gwendolen a few afternoons later, looking into the schoolroom just as Clips emerged therefrom, a free agent.

"I can't," the other answered. "I have all this mending to do, and Batty's French exercises to correct besides."

"I'll soon settle that," muttered Gwendolen crossly.

She went out of the room, and presently came back saying,

"Mother says you may come."

It was one of the soft surprises in days that sometimes come to us while it is yet winter, with gentle hints of a yet distant spring. The snow and cold winds of so short a time ago seemed forgotten nightmares.

When they had walked a little way in silence, Gwendolen said moodily,

"What a horrible, disappointing, cruel world it is. I wonder if there is any other? I'm sure I hope so. And yet I don't know but what I would rather fade quietly away and be nothing."

"I should object to fading away quietly and being nothing," said Dulcie in her crisp, decided voice. "I think we have a right to expect immortality. If I didn't believe in a future existence, I should simply be an atheist."

"Sometimes I think it doesn't much matter what

we are," returned Gwendolen with increased gloom—"so long as we manage to worry along and die respectably without having disgraced ourselves or our friends."

"You are depressed to-day," said the other gently. "I don't wonder."

But Gwendolen was in no mood for sympathy.

"There's no particular reason why I should be depressed to-day more than any other day," she answered, and her tone was snappish—"except that I have got a wretched cold in my head, and that it makes my nose and eyes as red as raspberries."

Dulcie was silent.

"Why do you have anything to say to an ill-natured wretch like me?" her companion broke out suddenly. "You can't care for my friendship really? No one could. I daresay your friends in Scotland are quite different."

"I don't want all my friends cut out exactly on the same pattern," said Dulcie, trying not to smile. "I can be rather nasty myself at times."

"Well, I wish you'd be nasty to-day, then. I feel as if I must quarrel with somebody. And I think you would be refreshing."

"On the contrary—I am the most prosaic person in the world to quarrel with. I simply hold my tongue and wait until people have found their tempers again."

"After all," sighed Gwendolen, "I don't believe I have energy enough to quarrel to-day. As a matter of fact, Dulcie, I want to ask your advice. Usually I go to Grandmother for that commodity, as we all do. But in this case her advice is a foregone conclusion. Now I want you to view the question from a girl's standpoint."

She paused; and Dulcie too was silent. They were in the Park now, striking across towards Knightsbridge. Presently Gwendolen resumed,

"Mr. Donnithorne has asked me to marry him."

"Oh!" exclaimed Dulcie.

"Yes," was the calm answer. "He has asked me to marry him, as I knew he would do sooner or later. Shall I accept him?"

"My dear Gwendolen," remonstrated Dulcie—"how can I possibly advise you in such a matter?"

"Of course I don't love him," went on Gwendolen meditatively. "No woman could really love such a conceited empty-headed creature. And besides, I don't think he is very good, somehow. But he is sufficiently good-looking to be a creditable appendage. He will be wealthy. And, as mother constantly reminds me, he has the off-chance of being a baronet."

"But—you care for someone else," said Dulcie abruptly.

The other's face flamed.

"Care for someone else!" she echoed, her intonation sharp and shrill. Then in a changed voice, "Well—suppose I do? Do you think I am going to waste all my life in fretting for a man who has shown that he will have none of me, or that I am going to grow into a fussy old woman like Aunt Felicia, and never marry anyone at all? No, thank you."

"I didn't know you cared for anyone who didn't care for you," said Dulcie bluntly. "I thought you cared for Mr. Kingston."

"Good Heavens, Dulcie, don't be so brutally frank. As it happens, I have had very good proof that Mr. Kingston does not care for me. This morning I asked his mother if I might see him. He is a little better, you know, and able to see visitors. She brought down a message that he desired to be kindly remembered to me, but that he did not feel equal to talking to anyone—or words to that effect. I felt as if someone had slapped my face."

"Gwendolen," said Dulcie after a pause—"you must not be vexed with me if I say that I don't think you understand Mr. Kingston. If he loved you less——"

"Oh, I'm like Garry, I've no patience with people who have to be understood," interrupted Gwendolen

impatiently. "I like to be told things right out, with no circumlocution or nonsense. Roy has treated me shamefully, and I have humiliated myself quite enough, and——"

"You want my advice?" put in Dulcie earnestly.

"Yes. At least, I think so."

"Then you must *not* marry Mr. Donnithorne."

"I don't call that advice," said the other in a dry voice. "I call it an order."

"I can't help it. I must say what I think. It is even worse than if you thought of marrying a man you could at least respect. If you marry Mr. Donnithorne you will wish yourself dead before six months are over."

"That would be nothing new," Gwendolen muttered with a quick sigh. "Well, I daresay you are right. After all, I don't feel equal to the *rôle* of Mrs. Donnithorne. Wait a minute."

She stopped, and took from her pocket a violet-coloured handkerchief, which she pushed into the breast of her jacket, leaving one corner conspicuously outward. Then she said calmly,

"This is Mr. Donnithorne's answer."

"What do you mean?" asked Dulcie, with wondering eyes.

"I told him I was coming to the Park to-day, and that if, on reflection, I found that I could marry him,

I should have a white handkerchief in the breast of my jacket. And if I found I couldn't, I should have a violet-coloured one."

"Gwendolen—*what* a girl you are!"

"Look! Here he comes," observed Gwendolen indifferently.

A tall young man appeared in the near distance. When he was within thirty yards or so of the two girls, he stopped. Then walked on again very slowly. As he came nearer, Dulcie saw him change colour visibly. Then he lifted his hat, and turned sharply down a side path.

"Gwendolen!" remonstrated Dulcie. "I feel horribly shocked; and yet I feel inclined to laugh long and wildly."

"Not yet," said Gwendolen the incorrigible, consigning the fatal token once more to her pocket. "Wait till the man is out of hearing. Well—I hope I've done right. If I haven't, on your head be all the blame. Let us go home now. It's going to rain."

* * * * * * *

In the morning came a letter for Gwendolen from Mrs. Kingston. It was a very kind and almost motherly letter, and even Gwendolen's rebellious

heart was touched thereby. Its purport was a tactfully-worded invitation to spend a week or two at Regent's Park.

"My eldest daughter is leaving town for a month," wrote Mrs. Kingston, "and I shall miss her. Will you take her place for a time, and enliven what is a very quiet household at present? Say to your mother that I shall take great care of you."

This letter was at once subjected to Grandmother's inspection, the recipient declaring that nothing should induce her to be the guest of the Kingstons.

"Well, dear," said Grandmother, when she had listened to a good deal of wild and hysterical conversation, "it is just as well you should not care about going, for I think your mother would have objected."

"I don't see why she should," returned Gwendolen flushing deeply. "But she was always unjust to Roy—always."

Grandmother smiled as her young kinswoman turned her head away. If she thought that any unjust treatment of Mr. Kingston had not been confined to Mrs. Medlicott, she made no sign.

"Do you think it my duty to go?" asked Gwendolen presently.

"I think we need not speak of it, dear," was the quiet answer. "You have decided not to go. Will you hand me my knitting? Thank you."

"Grandmother"—this after a somewhat long silence —"I am not going to marry Mr. Donnithorne."

Grandmother looked up quickly. But she only said in a quiet voice,

"Why?"

"For one thing—I don't love him."

"Then that is quite a sufficient reason, my dear."

"I shall never be married," went on Gwendolen gloomily. "I hate men. Either they are altogether bad, or they are fools, or they are tyrants."

"I think I know a few exceptions," said the old lady, when she had counted a row of stitches.

"Oh, you always think the best of everybody. But that is because they only shew their best selves to you."

"You have paid me a very beautiful compliment, my Gwendolen. But I know somebody who does not show her best self to me, or to anyone else."

"I haven't got any best self," was the moody answer. "It's all worst."

"Brian would tell you that that is not logical," smiled her listener.

"Oh, Brian—I daresay. But somehow I think Brian is nicer lately than he used to be. The other day when I was standing at the window, feeling very queer and miserable, he came and put his arm round me and kissed me. I pulled myself away, of course,

but—I thought it was nice of him. He never did it before. I never thought he cared about me."

"There is a story by Hans Andersen," said Grandmother in a dreamy voice, "about a boy who got a splinter of a demon mirror in one of his eyes, so that everything good and true appeared distorted and hideous."

"I was that boy," answered Gwendolen with a sigh. "And when I died I wasn't good enough to go to Heaven, so they sent me on earth again to have a bad time as a girl."

"We make our own bad times, very often," said Grandmother, "whether we are girls or boys."

After a pause Gwendolen said hesitatingly,

"Do you suppose Mr. Kingston knew his mother had written?"

"I cannot tell, my dear. I think it is more than probable."

"Very likely I shall not see him at all if I go."

"Very likely not. I believe he is still confined to his room."

"No. He is allowed to lie on the couch in his dressing-room now."

Another pause.

"Grandmother"—whispered Gwendolen close to the old lady's ear—"will *you* ask mother to let me go?"

CHAPTER XV.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

"Such friendship easily becomes tender: the one spreads strong sheltering wings that delight in spreading, the other gets the warm protection which is also a delight."—*George Eliot.*

DULCIE LOVELL was on her way to a certain warehouse in the city, where the family of Medlicott had purchased school-books and stationery from time immemorial. Armed with a long list, and minute directions as to locality, she took her way to Gower Street with a light heart.

The Underground always interested this small country mouse, and to-day she found even more amusement than usual in listening to the conversation of her third class fellow-passengers.

"Wy, wot's the haristocracy hever done for us?" a red-faced individual, slightly under the influence of stimulants, was asking his *vis-a-vis*, a consumptive-looking youth in a voluminous crimson comforter. "They sits upon us, they tramples upon our feelin's,

they turns up their 'aughty noses at us, and all for wot? Wy, because their hancestors robbed and cheated our hancestors. And wot's a hancestor, when you come to think of it? Ain't you or I 'ad as many of 'em as Lord This or Earl That? Wy, of course we 'ave. But our hancestors was honest men—more fools they, say I—and so they had precious little cash and less credit, and 'ad to work for their livin', instead o' spendin' other folks' money, and givin' cheek when honest men arsked for their own. Hanybody can be a haristocrat, they can, if they've 'ad an odd number o' swindlin' grandfathers, or if they've darned cheek enough. Wot's to prevent me from bein' a haristocrat to-morrow, if I was to come into a fortune? Money's the only real haristocracy. Wot do you say, young man, eh?"

"Oh, I don't know nothin' about no hancestors," replied the youth addressed, in a guttural voice. "I was a foundlin', I was."

"There again!" resumed the other excitedly. "Who is responsible for two-thirds o' the foundlin's in London—or anywheres else, for that matter? Wy, haristocrats—bloomin', cheeky, head-in-the-air haristocrats." (Here followed some very forcible and not at all choice language, which was objected to by a refined-looking young man who sat next Dulcie, and had observed her horrified expression.)

"And who are you now?" continued the orator, addressing the young man in question. "And wot is it to you wot expressions I may like to make use of? You're the Prince of Wales in disguise, perhaps? Or perhaps you're the Dook of Cambridge? Wy, a third-class carriage ain't no place for you! You ought to travel in a Pullman droring-room car, you ought, with carpets and mirrors and pillers all around. I s'pose you've been spendin' your substance in riotous livin', and that's wy you've to make shift with a third-class carriage. You're a cumberer of the ground, you are. But p'raps you're lookin' out for a job? Ow'd you like bricklayin', now, for a change? You'd 'ave something more to do with them white hands of yours than twist the bloomin' moustarche off your face!"

Then followed more sulphurous language, which was interrupted by a greasy-looking man in a spotted neckerchief, who observed in a voice that matched his face,

"I don't waste none o' my time railin' against haristocrats and hancestors. I makes my twenty bob a week, and I ain't no one to keep but myself, and I puts in not 'arf a bad time. I 'as my drink when I wants it, and I lets it alone when I don't want it. And jest as often as I can, I goes to the Hopera. The Hopera is my 'obby, it is, and a werry 'armless

one too. I knows a good toon when I 'ears it, and I've a bit of voice myself."

Which he proceeded to demonstrate then and there, by giving selections from the "Hoperas" he most affected.

During this entertainment the train stopped at Moorgate Street and Dulcie got out.

It is probable that she took the wrong turning on coming out of the station, for some minutes later, on asking a policeman to direct her to Cheapside, she learned that she was some considerable way from her desired haven. So she shrinkingly retraced her steps, trying to remember whether the guardian of the law had said "second to the right and third to the left," or "third to the right and second to the left."

As she stood, a desolate waif, on the kerb, preparing to plunge into the appalling whirl of cabs, carriages, drays, and all known vehicles that faced her, a voice said pleasantly,

"Have you lost your way? Can I be of any service?"

Dulcie looked up, and met the gaze of a tall stout man, smiling under a blue-black moustache.

"You are very kind," she said gratefully. "I'm afraid I really have lost my way. I am looking for Cheapside."

"Pray let me assist you," said the man. "It is only a short distance from here. May I conduct you across the street?"

"This is your first experience of the city, I imagine," he observed, when he had pioneered her safely to the other side.

"Yes," Dulcie answered, vaguely uneasy, she could hardly have told why. "I think I can manage very well now, thank you," she added. "Do not let me take you out of your way any further."

"It is a pleasure," he murmured, looking into her face with an expression in his eyes that made her blush violently. "I could not think of leaving you until you are safely at your destination. You are too charming a young lady to roam about the city unprotected."

"But if I do not desire your company, sir?" exclaimed the girl indignantly. As she spoke she stood still and regarded him with amazed displeasure.

"Now you are joking," he said soothingly. "I am sure you have far too much good sense to make a scene in the street——"

"Ah!" Dulcie exclaimed, with a throbbing accent of relief.

For, crossing the street within a few yards of her, she saw Brian Medlicott coming. He glanced from her to her companion in surprise, which was accentuated as Dulcie caught his arm, saying,

"Oh, Mr. Brian, I am so glad to see you!"

Meanwhile, her persecutor had judiciously effaced himself in the crowd.

"Has that brute annoyed you in any way?" asked Brian in a suppressed voice, his face somewhat white.

"No, no, it was my own fault," she answered hurriedly. "I have lost my way, and he saw that I had, I suppose——"

"Where do you want to go?" he said, still looking dangerous. "You should not be here by yourself—at least not until you know your way about better."

"I want to find Cheapside. Your mother has given me a list of school-books and stationery to choose at Brown's."

"Pooh, absurd. I could have seen about them. Come, I will take you there. Then we will go and have some tea."

"I'm afraid I can't," she objected. "It will make me so late in getting home."

"Never mind that. I shall take you home myself."

"Oh no, certainly not. I couldn't think of allowing you. Besides, there is no need at all that you should."

"I am sorry if my presence is disagreeable to you," he said shortly, "because I shall certainly accompany you to Bloomsbury Square."

"Your presence is not disagreeable to me," she answered, laughing as they walked on. "You know that quite well."

"I know nothing of the kind," observed her companion, who did not appear to be in the best of tempers. "The last time we were *tête-à-tête*, you showed me very distinctly that you were rather more than bored."

"The last time?"—repeated Dulcie uncertainly.

"Ah, you have forgotten?" he interrupted her with a somewhat sarcastic smile. "And yet our *tête-à-têtes* have not been so numerous. I am referring to the night of my mother's dance. However, possibly you were wise to break up our conference. If I remember correctly, I was on the eve of making rather a fool of myself by confiding to you the one romantic episode of my life."

"People don't usually consider they make fools of themselves by confiding in me," said Dulcie with a certain compression of her lips that betokened displeasure.

"No? Well, perhaps they are right and I am wrong. Now, here is Brown's. Give me your list, please."

"No. I am to choose the stationery. Mrs. Medlicott wishes it."

"I know my mother's tastes, I think," he answered smiling. "Give it to me."

"I would rather do as I was told," she said obstinately.

"But you are not doing as you are told."

"I do not recognize your right to command," she returned with a slight uplifting of her chin.

"I beg your pardon," he said coldly. "Please yourself, then. Only do not let us spend any more time in wrangling. I shall wait for you."

In a very dignified way, Dulcie gave her orders. Then she made a sudden and humiliating discovery. She had lost her purse.

Her face became crimson, and her eyes met Brian's with such startled dismay that his coldness melted into concern.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked, coming quite close to her.

"My purse——" she whispered unsteadily. "I have lost it."

"Where had you it last? Do you remember?"

"I had it—I felt it in my pocket, just before that man——"

"Ah. I'm afraid you won't see it again. Had you much in it?"

"A sovereign, and half-a-sovereign, and nearly ten shillings in silver. And my return ticket was in it too."

"It is a pity," said Brian, looking down at her

distressed face with the merest suspicion of a smile. "But it is less a pity than if I had not met you. How much have you to pay here?"

She told him; and when he had paid it they sallied forth into the rapidly-darkening streets.

"It isn't worth crying about," he said in an amused undertone, as he took her across to the opposite pavement.

"I'm not crying," was the indignant answer.

"You are just going to."

"No, I am not. I am thinking how angry Mrs. Medlicott will be. And no wonder. It seems so inconceivably careless of me. If it had been my own money, I should have cared less——"

"I will undertake to soothe Mrs. Medlicott. Meanwhile, you are going to have tea."

"Oh no, let us go home."

"Miss Lovell, that is very selfish of you. I have been working hard all day, and feel I must recruit exhausted nature with tea and muffins, and you want to deprive me of both."

"Mr. Brian, how absurd you are," she said impatiently. "Have I not heard you say fifty times that you hate tea, and that muffins are nightmares?"

"You must have misunderstood me," he answered with gravity. "Ah, we shall get what we want here, I think."

And Dulcie—not altogether unwillingly—resigned herself to circumstances. They seated themselves at a small marble table, and Brian ordered a sumptuous tea. He had evidently made up his mind to be agreeable, and Dulcie became quite cheerful.

The small tea-party was eminently a success, and prolonged itself marvellously.

"After all a muffin is a refreshing morsel," observed Brian, gingerly helping himself to a third section. "I know I shall have a horrible fit of indigestion after this mad carouse, but that is a detail." After a minute he added, "Let us send a wire home and go to a theatre."

"Good gracious, no. Why, Mr. Brian, you are evidently in a most dissipated frame of mind to-day."

"Let's do it!" he persisted. "It would be awfully nice."

But she shook her head.

"No, no. Not for worlds. It would show such a jubilant disregard of having lost your mother's money. Have some more tea."

As he handed his cup across the table, his hand touched hers.

She blushed, and his hand shook slightly.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHIEFLY SENTIMENTAL.

"Love comes back to an empty heart,
Or a being clothed in love's sweet guise;
Love bids sorrow and tears depart:
The dear old light in the tender eyes
Like a swift bright sunbeam hastens here
And warms the life that was cold and drear.

'The old, old love of the days of yore!
Is it the same? Oh, love, confess,
Is it not deeper than e'er before,
To cheer, to guide, and for ever bless?
Answer me, love; turn not away;
Speak to me; say you have come to stay.

"Who can be sure of love's replies,
Hiding behind his myriad masks?
Yet to my soul this dear disguise
Savours of Heaven; 'tis all it asks.
Swift, sweet tears to the eyelids start:
Love comes back to an empty heart."

J. C. H.

IT was a cold snowy February evening when Gwendolen arrived at the gloomy mansion of the Kingstons.

She came in a hansom and in a very bad temper. The latter condition being due to the fact that she had begun to doubt her wisdom in coming at all.

Mrs. Kingston met her at the dining-room door, and kissed her gravely but affectionately.

"I am glad to see you, my dear. Come and have some tea."

Owing to the fit of temper before mentioned, Gwendolen did not ask for Roy. But while they were having tea, Mrs. Kingston said,

"Roy is a good deal better to-day. I hope he may be able to come downstairs next week."

"Yes?" returned Gwendolen, stooping to pick up a piece of tea-cake she had dropped.

Mrs. Kingston rose hastily, swept up the crumbs with a small gilt hearth-brush, and consigned them to the fire.

"Oh, I am so sorry," murmured the visitor.

The door opened, and the second daughter of the house entered.

"Tea has been in for some time, Eliza, my dear," said her mother reprovingly.

Eliza had some time ago said good-bye to her thirtieth year; but her mother still treated her as a child.

"I couldn't come sooner," she answered. "I was finishing the accounts for the clothing society. How

are you, Gwendolen? Good gracious, how blue and cold you look! Why don't you put more clothes on? *I* never feel cold. I've too much to do. It's imagination half the time."

Gwendolen made no answer. For Eliza was a terrible and unanswerable person. In appearance she was tall and thin, and wore her brown lustreless hair brushed away from her high and polished forehead; and her face was almost an exact reproduction of her mother's.

Perhaps Gwendolen might have been forgiven the having alluded to the female members of the Kingston family as "frumps." It is curious, by the way, that there is a certain type of feminine Christianity, which is subordinated by the belief that the more the inward graces the less the outward ought to be. In their narrow minds immorality and elegance are inseparably united, conversely with dowdiness and virtue. To this type the female Kingstons belonged.

"May I go up and take off my things?" asked Gwendolen, when Eliza had hastily partaken of tea and bread and butter.

"Certainly, my dear," said Mrs. Kingston. "Eliza will go with you."

The bedroom allotted to the visitor, though handsomely and solidly furnished, had the same cold,

inhospitable aspect as the dining and drawing-rooms. No fire enlivened its gloom on this bitterly cold night, for fires in bedrooms—unless in the case of illness—were unknown luxuries in the Kingston household.

Eliza lit a couple of candles that loomed tall and pale on the dressing-table, and blew out the one she carried. (Gas was not "laid on" in this sinister old house, almost as much behind the times as its mistress.)

"You don't care for warm water, I suppose?" observed Eliza in her sharp high-pitched voice. "We never use it. It is a most enervating habit."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," Gwendolen said, removing her hat shiveringly.

"What a pity you don't brush your hair off your forehead," continued the second Miss Kingston. "I think the way you wear it is very disfiguring."

"Do you?" was the brief answer.

"Have you seen Roy since his illness?" Eliza next observed.

"No."

"You will find him a good deal changed," the other went on.

"Yes? Illness has that effect, at times."

"I think you are looking quite fagged and old yourself," resumed Eliza. "Why, you might be as old as I am to look at you."

Gwendolen glanced at their respective reflections in the long mirror which occupied the centre of the wardrobe, and smiled involuntarily. Happily, Eliza did not see the smile.

"I suppose you have been fretting about this affair with Roy," she said. "I believe he has too. However, I daresay it's all for the best. And so I keep telling Roy."

Gwendolen was silent.

"Well, you'll come down when you are ready," Eliza said finally.

The other, who was unearthing a dainty pair of evening shoes from her portmanteau, answered wearily in the affirmative.

The fire had been built up with unwonted lavishness in the drawing-room when Gwendolen got downstairs, and it looked very nearly cheerful. Mrs. Kingston was making a coarse flannel petticoat, evidently "for the poor." Roy had fallen asleep, she told Gwendolen, and she had brought her work downstairs. Eliza was tearing up strips of lint with a newspaper spread upon the floor to receive the fluff. Gwendolen seated herself midway between these two busy workers, and asked, meekly enough, if there was anything she could do.

"Not in that gown," observed Eliza shortly, glancing with disapproving eyes at the girl's smart and tasteful

attire. "What on earth did you get yourself up like that for? You'll find it rather thrown away here, I can tell you. We don't have any promiscuous young men dropping in here of an evening. And Roy never looks at a woman's clothes."

"You can wind that green wool for me, my dear," said Mrs. Kingston. "Put it on the backs of those two chairs. I am going to knit some shawls for three poor old women. It's not the colour I should have chosen, but it will be useful and won't show the dirt."

"That's just why I chose it," snapped Eliza. "What does one colour matter more than another to old women in an almshouse? They'll be wanting embroidered tea-gowns for them next, in high-art colours. As if the old creatures cared."

Gwendolen began to wind obediently, speculating absently as to whether, when she herself should be an old woman—as old as the destined wearers of the projected shawls—she too would be indifferent as to appearances. Then she thought of Grandmother, and was comforted.

After dinner Mrs. Kingston said,

"Gwendolen, will you take up the evening paper to Roy?"

Then as the girl flushed and hesitated, she added,

"He expects you, my dear. I told him I should send you. He is in his dressing-room."

Gwendolen took the paper, and went slowly upstairs.

He expected her, his mother had said. Did he want her, then? Was he anxious to see her? Her heart beat fast.

Outside Kingston's door she stopped; then knocked softly.

"Come in," said a weak voice that made her pulses thump madly.

"I have brought you the paper," she said in a low voice without other greeting.

Kingston half rose from the sofa on which he was lying, and held out his hand. But he did not speak, possibly because his lips were not quite steady. He looked pale and thin, and his eyes were heavy and dispirited.

"Don't rise, please," the girl said hurriedly.

"Are you feeling better?" she continued after a dreadful pause.

"Yes, thank you. I hope soon to be all right again."

Another pause.

"You look awfully ill," Gwendolen said desperately. "I—we—everybody, I mean—has been very anxious about you."

"That is very kind of you and everybody," he answered. "I daresay I do look rather a scarecrow. This is the first day I have been fully dressed and out of my dressing-gown."

"Is there anything I can do for you?" went on poor Gwendolen, feeling curiously chilled and desolate.

"Nothing, I think. Unless you would kindly move the lamp a little nearer. Thank you."

The girl lingered.

"Are you all well at Bloomsbury Square?" asked Kingston, still in that grave cold voice that was so unlike the voice Gwendolen used to know.

"Yes, thank you. They all sent kind messages to you."

He bowed silently.

Gwendolen's heart beat in passionate revolt. Why had she come? she asked herself fiercely. Why had she thrust herself upon this man who showed so plainly he no longer wanted her? She would go home to-morrow, that was one thing very certain.

She bade the invalid a hurried good-night, and went downstairs.

As she entered the drawing-room she fancied that both Mrs. Kingston and Eliza looked up surprised. The latter said,

"You found Roy a good deal changed, I suppose?"

"Yes," the girl answered.

She had indeed found him changed. It was only now that she realized how much she had hoped from seeing him again. He had always been so good and gentle to her. And those two letters? Ah, she had made up her mind to forget about those two letters. And now all seemed black and hopeless. As for Eliza—She felt that she absolutely hated Eliza.

"Didn't he ask you to read the paper to him?" inquired that lady acidly. "His eyes are hardly strong enough yet to read it for himself."

"No, he didn't ask me."

"Then why didn't you offer to do it, you silly thing? I suppose I shall have to go, as mother's throat is rough. Such a nuisance. I really haven't time in my life for invalids."

She laid aside her work with compressed lips and jerking fingers, and hastened out of the room.

Neither tenderness nor fineness of perception was among Eliza Kingston's strong points. And yet, I suppose she was a thoroughly good conscientious woman. Her goodness was of the repellent order, however; and to most people she was not only repellent, but uninteresting. Even the poor people to whom she devoted her life, though they thanked her and blessed her for her bounties, breathed fervent

sighs of relief when her back was turned. She did not know this, of course. And I doubt if she would have cared if she had known.

"Should you care for a game of cribbage, my dear?" asked Mrs. Kingston, when her daughter had left the room. "We have time for a couple of games before I go up to Roy."

Gwendolen got the cards mechanically. Yes, she told herself, she should certainly go home to-morrow.

* * * * * * * *

For the next few days Kingston was not quite so well, and kept his bed. Gwendolen had reconsidered her determination to go home, and wandered about restlessly in the wake of Mrs. Kingston, except when that lady was in her son's room. The weather was intensely cold, and depressing to the soul. But not to the soul of Eliza. She had no time to be depressed, nor to notice if other people were.

"I think Roy would like to see you, my dear," Mrs. Kingston said on the fourth day about tea-time. "He has asked for you once or twice."

"Asked for me. Are you sure?" murmured Gwendolen indistinctly.

"Am I sure, Gwendolen? Do you suspect me of an untruth?" inquired the old lady stiffly.

"I—I beg your pardon. But I thought, the last time, that he distinctly did *not* wish to see me."

However, she silently followed her hostess upstairs, carrying the invalid's tea and toast on a small tray.

"He seems very dull and low-spirited to-day, poor fellow," sighed Mrs. Kingston as they reached the landing. "Perhaps you can cheer him up a little."

Gwendolen thought it extremely unlikely. She felt in such sore need of being cheered up "all for her own hand." Indeed she hardly knew herself in the subdued tear-choked mood which appeared to have become normal with her. She seemed to live in a dream—a miserable restless dream, from which there was no hope of awaking.

Kingston was lying on the sofa when they entered, wrapped in a heavy dressing-gown. He looked haggard and worn-out. But Gwendolen fancied that a gleam of pleasure came into his eyes as he greeted her.

To her secret fury she was conscious of blushing violently, and blushed more violently still on seeing that her former lover noticed her blushes. He greeted her very gently; the coldness had gone from his voice, as well as from his eyes.

It is proverbial that some things—most things,

perhaps—rise in value in proportion to their unattainability. Gwendolen had never been used to idealize Kingston. She had never considered seriously his qualities or his possibilities. She had been almost bored by his love for her. And on the comparatively rare occasions when he had caressed her or spoken to her as lovers do, she had been repelled and restive.

But now that he was no longer her property, lo! he became the only desirable good. So she sat apart, like the poor Peri at the gate of Paradise, and felt that the days were evil.

Mrs. Kingston was fussing affectionately about her son in the way women love to do. She lamented that he would only take one cup of tea, that he ate nothing at all, that his eyes looked heavy. Her gaunt face seemed almost beautiful as she hung over him and stroked his hair. Kingston did not like having his hair stroked; but he was very fond of his mother, so he submitted patiently enough.

Presently a knock came to the door. A visitor was in the drawing-room, the maid said, and Miss Eliza was out.

"Look after Roy for a little, my dear," said Mrs. Kingston rising to leave the room. "I shall not be more than ten minutes or a quarter of an hour."

"Shall I read to you?" asked Gwendolen, when she and Kingston were alone.

"No, thank you. I would rather you talked to me for a little instead."

His voice was tired, but decidedly friendly, and Gwendolen felt touched.

She brought a low chair within reasonable distance of the sofa, and sat down.

"What shall I talk about?" she said.

"Anything."

He had closed his eyes wearily.

"Don't you want to go to sleep?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"I have nothing to do but go to sleep from morning till night and from night till morning," he answered. "It grows monotonous."

"But you will soon be able to be downstairs again," she said consolingly. "The doctor says so."

"Yes, I suppose I shall. Gwendolen—you are not looking very well. What is the matter with you?"

"Temper," she replied shortly.

Something very like his old smile answered her. Then his face grew grave, almost stern again.

"I suppose you have had much to think of lately?" he said.

Her eyes flashed resentfully.

"I suppose we all have our share of things to

think of," she answered. "I don't know exactly what you mean, however."

"I mean—that I understand you are going to be married," he said slowly.

"Yes? And to whom, may I ask?"

Kingston's pale face grew paler.

"Is it true, Gwendolen?" he said, almost in a whisper.

"I don't know," she answered, her voice cold and hard.

"You don't know? What do you mean?"

"How can I tell if I am going to marry anyone until—he asks me?"

"He has not asked you, then?"

His voice was low and broken, and as he spoke he covered his face with one thin hand.

Gwendolen raised her head, and over her face a rosy flush swept swiftly. Her eyes softened and grew darker. She drew her breath in a long uneven sigh.

"No"—she said—"he has not asked me—yet."

"And when he does? I have no right to ask. But—it means so much to me."

She could hardly hear the words.

"When he does"—she answered with a cruel but delicious feeling of having the best of it—"then—then——'

There was a pause. Then her eyes met his, and her heart smote her.

"I am not going to marry Mr. Donnithorne," she said, very slowly and distinctly.

"You are not? Then who—Gwendolen——"

He put out his hand to her. How wasted and feeble it looked, she thought remorsefully. And just then Mrs. Kingston came in.

"It was old Miss Ferrier," she said. "She wanted a subscription for the West Californian Young Men's Christian Thought Association."

* * * * * * *

Kingston did not see Gwendolen alone on the next day, nor the next. On the third day, however, she came stealing in just at dusk in the wake of his mother and the tea-tray. Eliza was out for the day, and tea was to be in Roy's dressing-room. The lamp was lit, and the fire was blazing gloriously. And Gwendolen turned her face as much from the light as she could, and sat in the shadow.

Tea over, she was following Mrs. Kingston out of the room when Roy said faintly,

"Gwendolen!"

She turned, and at the same time Mrs. Kingston went out and shut the door.

"Do you want me?" Gwendolen asked, her back uncivilly turned to the person she addressed.

"Yes—I want you."

"Well?"

"I can't speak to you unless you come nearer," he said unsteadily.

She came nearer. So near, that it was easy for him to take her hand.

"Gwendolen," he whispered, clasping her fingers tightly, and looking up at her with his face incredibly changed and softened—"Gwendolen—what answer are you going to give him?"

Gwendolen's answer was characteristic and peculiar. She simply flung herself on her knees by the sofa, and laid her head silently on Kingston's breast.

There was an infinitesimal pause, then he gathered her up in his arms, murmuring brokenly,

"My darling—I knew you would come back to me, at last!"

CHAPTER XVII.

IN WHICH DULCIE IS AT A PREMIUM.

"Yes love is everything to you and me,
For love and you and I are one; let be
What is to be; let what will disappear,
Love cannot die; that always will be clear."

Anon.

"Two thoughtless rattled-pated boys——
But then, so lovable!"

* * * *

"ONE thing I must tell you, my dearest," said Kingston the next day, when his mother and Eliza had considerately left the lovers alone. "I am not quite so well off as I was. I have lost money lately, and unless you would like to live here—in the house with my mother and sisters—when we are married, we should have to begin in rather a small way."

"How small a way?" asked his *fiancée* in a dreamy voice. "Do you mean we should have to live in lodgings?"

"Good Heavens, no, child. But probably we should, at first, have to live in the suburbs, and perhaps only have one servant. It was because I knew of this some time ago, that I refused to allow you to renew your engagement with me. Now that I know you really care for me—it is different. For I expect things will be better by and bye, my Gwendolen. Only—I don't want to wait for you any longer."

Here a slight interlude.

"Therefore, don't you think," resumed Kingston tenderly, "that it would be wiser, for a year or so, to keep house all together?"

Gwendolen looked at him steadily.

"Roy," she said, "your mother is a good kind woman, and I daresay if I were always in a good temper, and never ill, and if you never left me even for an hour, I *might* live in the same house with her without committing suicide, or murder. But never—never—*never*—would I be the housemate of Eliza!"

Kingston's brows contracted slightly.

"Poor Eliza," he said with a restless movement of his head. "She does seem to rub people the wrong way somehow. I don't know why. She is very—very——"

"Yes," put in Gwendolen gravely, "that is just it. She is very! She is *very* very! Perhaps it is her

face," she added in an absent voice. "But no, she can't help that. Or perhaps it is the way she wears her hair. But it is something. Don't look vexed, dear Roy," she said, laying her head shyly against his for a brief second. "You know *you* can't get on with Eliza. You always have to keep reminding yourself how worthy and well-meaning she is, or else you couldn't bear her."

Kingston was silent.

"And so," continued Gwendolen, "I had much rather live in a small house with you—just with you —nobody but you——"

He stroked her hair softly. To him also the thought of the little home "with you, just you, nobody but you"—was infinitely sweet.

But he said wearily,

"I hardly see how it could be, dear. Your mother would not like it, most certainly. No, I think that at anyrate for the first year, we had better——"

"Roy——" she interrupted him, "are you going to marry me—or my mother?"

"You, I hope," he answered with a half smile.

"Then it is I who am to be pleased, not my mother. And I won't live in a hotch-potch of a family. It never does. You remember the Dawsons."

"No. What about the Dawsons?"

"The son married a very nice girl, and they all

lived together; he and she and his mother and sisters. The consequence was they quarrelled continually, and at last they had to have a judicial separation, or something like that, and one of them died. I forget which."

"It sounds rather vague," he said, laughing a little.

"The only thing is," went on Gwendolen, lacing her fingers one within the other, and gazing into the heart of the fire—"that I can't cook."

"Can't you?" said Roy, who had been brought up in the faith. "I thought all women could cook. But it doesn't matter. I shouldn't expect you to do things of that kind."

"But I suppose I could learn," she added after a brief silence. "I believe it's very simple. You buy a cookery-book, and you wear a large apron to keep your gowns from being spotted, and there you are."

"Eliza cooks well, I believe," observed Eliza's brother incautiously. "She could teach you, I daresay."

"Thank you," was the brief answer. "I shall not require to trouble her, I think."

Kingston capitulated. He could plainly see that the proposed *menage* would not "fit in."

He put his arm round her, and their conversation became irrelevant.

* * * * * * *

The news was received at Bloomsbury Square in diverse fashion. Grandmother and Paul Medlicott were undisguisedly pleased. Mrs. Medlicott was angry, and improved the occasion by many homilies upon "wasted chances," "flying in the face of Providence," etc., etc.; while Garry and Jim Venner confided to each other their opinion that "Kingston was a jolly flat not to keep out of it while he was out of it."

These two chums, by the way, had been mooning about in a suspiciously sentimental way, of late. They had even been suspected of quarrelling with each other, a hitherto unknown quantity in their friendship.

But one afternoon they were seen crossing the Square arm in arm, and with faces of portentous gravity. Garry opened the door with his latch-key; both youths silently divested themselves of their overcoats and hung up their hats, then sauntered about the hall nervously and without looking at each other.

All at once Garry straightened himself up, and saying sharply,

"Come on, Jim"—directed his steps towards the schoolroom.

Dulcie was there alone, frowning over Batty's somewhat unique translation of a French fable.

The two lads entered precipitately, and closed the door.

"May we come in?" said Garry with an unwonted accession of colour.

"It is rather late to ask that," replied Dulcie laughing. "But if you wait one minute, I will attend to you. Sit down like dear boys, and don't speak until I give you leave."

They drew two chairs side by side to the table and seated themselves thereon, watching Dulcie as she sowed vicious little blue-pencil marks broadcast over the hapless Batty's smeary pages.

She was looking almost pretty to-day. A faint pink colour came and went in her cheeks, and her hair had ruffled itself becomingly over her forehead.

"Now, boys," she said at last in a cheerful voice, "I have finished. What can I do for you? But you both look very solemn. Has anything happened?"

"No, not exactly," answered Garry, digging a pen diligently into the table, and glancing sideways at Jim, whose face was almost as red as his hair.

Dulcie looked from one embarrassed young man to the other in mingled surprise and amusement.

"I'm sure something important has happened," she said. "Are you both engaged to be married? But no—you are too young. *What* is it? Do tell me. I feel quite anxious."

"Look here, Miss Lovell," began both simultaneously Then there was a pause.

"I am looking," replied the girl, leaning her arms on the table and letting her eyes dance merrily.

"You're the eldest, Garry. Fire away," muttered Jim.

Garry fixed his eyes upon the pen he was maltreating, and blurted out,

"Look here, Miss Lovell, don't chaff, because we're awfully in earnest. Jim and me have made up our minds that you are the only girl we could ever care for. And we both think that when we can afford to marry, you know, you are the kind of girl we would like to marry. Of course we can't both have you. So we thought——"

He paused, while Dulcie regarded him with round, incredulous eyes.

"So we thought," he resumed hurriedly—"that the straightest and most honourable thing to do would be to come to you both at once, and—and see which of us you—you preferred, you know."

For a moment or two Dulcie was too much astonished to speak. Then she said with a relieved laugh,

"You absurd boys! Of course you are joking!"

"Are we?" put in Jim. "There's precious little joking about us, I can tell you. You should feel my heart. It's thumping like sixty to the dozen."

"We shouldn't be likely to joke on such a subject," observed Garry, with an aggrieved dignity that struck Dulcie as extremely funny. "We've come to you, fair and square, to ask you which of us you'll have. Of course, whichever of us you choose, the other will leave the room at once. And hang it all, Miss Lovell, I think it's hard lines that you should laugh at us."

"I am not laughing," answered the girl, with ominously quivering lips, nevertheless. "But really, my dear boys——"

Here she stopped suddenly.

"I think it's only right to tell you that Jim will be a thundering rich fellow when he comes of age," said Garry manfully, after a pause.

"Well, as to that," supplemented Jim in apologetic haste—"Garry is a much better-looking fellow than I am."

"Oh, get out!" returned Garry with scorn—"As if Miss Lovell cared about that—even if it were true." Then to Dulcie, "Either you prefer the one of us or the other. Which is it?"

His honest boyish eyes met hers so appealingly that all desire to laugh departed from her, and a curious choky feeling came into her throat.

"My dear boys," she said giving a friendly little hand to each, "you have paid me a very great

compliment. And it makes me feel awfully vexed and grieved——But I really, my dear Garry and Jim —I don't want to be married. I couldn't think of it. Please don't speak of it any more."

"What!" burst forth Garry in indignant unbelieving protest—"you won't have *either* of us!"

"Is it because we're too young?" demanded Jim.

"Partly. And partly because—because though I like you both immensely, and am awfully fond of you —I am not in the least in love with either of you."

"I told you so," observed Jim dismally to Garry.

"But in a year or two," pleaded the latter with pathetic earnestness.

"No," answered cruel Dulcie, shaking her head—"never."

"You like some other fellow, I suppose," observed Jim, who appeared plunged in gloom. "Some Scotch bounder, very likely."

"I say, you know, we shouldn't ask her that," put in Garry, with a corrective air.

Dulcie felt her cheeks grow crimson.

"Oh, please don't say anything more about it," she began uncertainly.

Then all at once, her eyes filled with tears.

This roused all the enamoured young men's chivalry. They were all contrition at once, called themselves "brutes," "cads," and other opprobrious

epithets, and finally promised, with almost painful solemnity, that the subject should never be broached again.

At this point a triumphant giggle was heard, and Master Clips emerged from under the table, where he had been successfully concealed throughout the interview.

"You little sneak!" exclaimed Garry furiously—"you deserve a thundering good thrashing!"

"I heard every word!" said the sneak calmly. "But I'm not going to tell. At least not if you'll give me—sixpence."

"I'll give you something you won't forget in a hurry!" roared Garry, who was white with rage.

Whereupon Dulcie judiciously caught up the offender, and hastened with him from the room.

CHAPTER XVIII.

REMINISCENCES.

"Perhaps you did not understand
How lightly flames of love were fanned!"

* * * *

IT was a few evenings later, and Dulcie Lovell was alone in the shadowy drawing-room in Bloomsbury Square. Mr. and Mrs. Medlicott were dining out, Batty and Garry were at an evening party, Clips was in bed, and Gwendolen was still the guest of the Kingstons. An old lady who lived across the Square had come in to play cribbage with Grandmother, and Dulcie, left to her own resources, proposed for herself a pleasant and profitable evening with the grand piano. Brian and Kenneth had gone out immediately after dinner, therefore she was sure of being undisturbed.

There was nothing wonderful about Dulcie Lovell's playing and singing, but she had a marvellously sympathetic touch, and her voice was clear and true.

She spent a pleasant enough half hour or so, dreaming through songs old and new, trying over the various pieces, grave and gay, with which the rack was gorged.

So absorbed was she that she did not hear the door open and shut again, and did not know that someone had come in. Her fresh young voice rose and fell, crooned into silence, then broke out anew.

Quite suddenly she stopped and wheeled round on the music-stool, stirred by the curious consciousness that tells us we are not alone.

"Is anyone there?" she said quickly.

Then she saw Brian Medlicott rising from a chair near the fire.

"Ah, you startled me," she said with an inflection of resentment.

"I am very sorry. Don't stop singing, Miss Lovell. You have soothed me wonderfully."

"Did you want soothing?" she asked, coming nearer to the fire.

"I'm afraid so."

"I thought I heard you go out."

"You did. But I returned some time ago."

In the light of the lamp she saw that he looked tired and worried, as he had looked that night in the schoolroom weeks ago.

"Sing to me," he said, an unwonted entreaty softening the usual masterfulness of his voice.

"No, I am tired."

"Then sit down and talk to me."

But with the contrariness usually ascribed to her sex, she went over to the piano and began to sing.

It was an old, old song she sang, and one that touched a painful enough chord in her listener's memory. And the words were these:

"Nae dreams disturb their sleep
In the auld kirkyard;
They hear nae kindred weep
In the auld kirkyard.
The sire wi' silver hair,
The mother's heart o' care,
The gay, the young, the fair,
Crowd the auld kirkyard.

"The heart's sad beatings cease
In the auld kirkyard;
And aliens rest in peace
In the old kirkyard.
Where ebbed dark floods o' strife,
Dove-like hope, wi' promise rife
Plants the broken branch of life
In the old kirkyard."

"It is years since I heard that song," Brian said after a brief silence.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

"Not specially. But it has associations for me."

Somewhat piqued, Dulcie rose and came over t the fire again.

Brian was leaning back in his chair, drawing h moustache absently through his fingers.

"I hope the associations were pleasant ones?" th girl said.

A somewhat bitter smile curved his lips.

"Not altogether," he answered.

Neither spoke again for some minutes. Outsid a storm was steadily rising. The trees in the Squa were creaking and rustling ominously.

"It is going to be a wild night." said Bria stirring the fire until it leaped into a laughing blaz

Dulcie shivered.

"Yes," she said, her voice very low.

"What is the matter?" he asked, turning to loo at her.

"Ah, nothing. But a sudden mood of depressio came over me."

"You should not sing sad songs. Why do you Women take such a delight in making themselv artificially miserable."

"Do we? Men take such a delight in railing woman in the abstract. Don't you think so?"

"Why do women challenge criticism, then? Neve theless, Heaven forbid that I should rail again women. It is a weak revenge."

"Have you something to revenge on our sex?"

"If I have, I shall not bore you by the recital of my wrongs."

Another silence. Then Dulcie's voice shyly,

"Mr. Brian!"

"Miss Lovell?"

"Will you not tell me what it was you were going to confide in me—that other time?"

"I think not."

"Why?"

"It would not interest you."

"You said it was romantic," she said dreamily after a pause.

She had seated herself in a low chair near the fire, and was gazing into the glowing coals with absorbed eyes, her chin resting on her hands.

"I suppose we all think our own experiences romantic," returned Brian somewhat curtly.

"Oh, I don't think so. I was once engaged to be married. And I didn't think it at all romantic."

He turned his head suddenly and looked at her.

"*You?*" he said with a sharp ring of surprise in his voice. "Impossible!"

"What is impossible?" she asked, letting her tranquil eyes meet his. "That I should have been engaged? Or that I should not have found it romantic?"

"Either."

"Nevertheless, both facts are true."

"Are you still engaged to him, then?" he asked in an odd voice.

She did not answer immediately. Then she said,

"No."

She heard him draw a long breath. But he did not speak.

After a minute she went on, still in a dreamy undertone,

"I was only engaged to him for a few months. He was not young. He was a good deal older than my father. But he was immensely rich."

"Why do you speak of him in the past tense? Is he dead?"

"Oh no. But I like to think of him in the past tense."

"You didn't care for him, then?"

"Not in the least. I rather disliked him."

"And you were going to marry him for his money."

"Don't speak in that tone, if you please. I was going to marry him, because at the time I thought it was my duty. Later I found it was not my duty, and told him so."

"Rather hard on him, was it not?"

"Perhaps. He married someone else a month or

two later, however. I think you will agree with me that the episode was not strikingly romantic."

"The romance would begin with your real reason for breaking your engagement, I imagine. I mean, if you had found out that you could not marry him because you——cared for some other man."

He was not looking at her; but there was a certain quality in his voice that made her regard his averted face curiously.

"No, that was not the reason," she said after a pause. "I have never cared for any man—in that way. I don't suppose I ever shall."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Men are all very well. I always get on with them, and they interest me. But I think they are unsatisfactory. And I don't think I should be satisfactory myself—as a wife. I fancy I should turn out to be an illusion."

"Possibly. It is a way your sex has."

"Mr. Brian—I should have thought you were above such cheap cynicism."

"I had no intention of being cynical. I only stated my impression."

"I suppose," she said slowly, "that perhaps your experience of women has been in some way, unfortunate?"

"Yes," he answered. "I think my experience,

in one way, at least, may be said to have been unfortunate."

"Tell me about it," she said under her breath.

"There is nothing to tell. At least not much. What there is, is rather humiliating."

"I suppose," she asked meditatively, "that you were very fond of her?"

"I was idiotically fond of her."

"And you were engaged?"

"We were engaged—yes. At least I thought so."

He was looking straight before him, his hands folded under his head.

"I don't know that I ought to tell you about it," he said with a quick frown.

"Don't if it will vex you to speak of it."

"Oh, I am a long way past that. Well, when I had been making a fool of myself for six months or so, I found out—that she was already married. Pleasant *dénouement*, was it not?"

There was a long silence.

"Are you shocked, Miss Lovell?" Brian asked, breaking the silence suddenly.

"No. Was it a long time ago?"

"It was three or four years ago."

"And you have not seen her since?"

"I have seen her once. She was very much changed—in many ways. I was thoroughly disillusioned."

"Ah. That was the night you came home from Liverpool," she said quickly.

"Yes," he answered.

The clock ticked monotonously for quite five minutes before Dulcie said in an absorbed voice,

"I am very, very sorry."

A half amused smile crept into his eyes. Then it faded away again.

"You need not be sorry," he answered. "It is all over and done with."

"Is anything ever all over and done with, I wonder?" mused Dulcie.

"Some things," he said. "That old romance of mine, for one."

"Do you mean that you don't care for her any more?" she asked slowly. "Or is that too leading a question?"

"It is rather a leading question. But it is one I don't mind answering. I don't care for her any more. I am quite heart-whole—as far as she is concerned." The last words came abruptly, and with a quick lowering of the breath.

She looked at him with a curious undefinable expression in her dark eyes.

"You care for someone else, then?" she said, hardly thinking what she said.

"I'm afraid I do."

"Why afraid? Doesn't she care for you?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Have you asked her?"

"No."

"Then you cannot know. It is difficult to understand a woman."

He leaned a little nearer to her.

"Dulcie!" he whispered.

All at once a wave of comprehension shook her. She grew pale, then red, then pale again. But she was less pale than he.

"Don't ask her yet!" she said, half putting out her hand to him. "Don't ask her yet. Wait!"

He caught her hand in his.

"Why not?" he said indistinctly. "Why not?"

The warm clasp of his fingers thrilled her. She drew her hand away in nervous haste.

He bent nearer to her.

"May I ask her—some day?"

And just then the door opened, and Garry came in, followed by Batty.

The latter rushed to Dulcie, and began a glowing account of the evening's triumphs.

But Garry regarded his brother with a suspicious frown.

CHAPTER XIX.

A NEARING CLOUD.

"I have tried—I have worked hard
And failed—
I am tired—let me rest."

* * * *

"Oh restless little feet and hands
And minds unsatisfied."

* * * * *

PAUL MEDLICOTT was sitting with Grandmother in the gloaming of a Saturday afternoon at the end of May.

Someone had said in speaking of him once, "that Medlicott always looked dead tired."

To-night he looked more dead tired than usual. He felt tired, too—tired and dispirited and heart-sick. Therefore he came to Grandmother, in the vague hope of being soothed and comforted.

"You look weary, Paul," the old lady said, when there had been a longer silence than usual.

"Weary?" he echoed, resting his head on his hand with a gesture that told much. "Yes, I am weary —body and soul."

Presently he added,

"It's no use, mother. I can't keep on much longer. Another year like the last would kill me—or drive me into a lunatic asylum."

"Is it so bad as that, my son?" his mother said gently.

"It is as bad as it can well be," he answered. "It is—bankruptcy."

"Oh, Paul—my dear Paul!"

Paul Medlicott buried his face in his hands.

"Yes, mother, it is close upon me at last. And upon my soul—" here he raised his head and drew a long breath—"I believe I shall welcome it. After the awful suspense I have gone through, any certainty would be a relief."

"My poor boy," murmured Grandmother—he was always a boy to her—"my poor boy, if I could only help you. Ah, why did you make me sink all my money in that annuity? I am an old woman, and it can only be——"

"Thank God you did sink your money in that annuity!" he interrupted her almost roughly. Then he hid his face in his hands again with a groan. "How shall I tell Clara?" he muttered. "I dare not think of it."

"It will not be worse for her than for you," Grandmother answered, with a certain quiet dignity that often came into her voice when her daughter-in-law was under discussion. "A wife must be willing to share her husband's fortunes."

"Ay—but not his misfortunes," said Medlicott brokenly.

"Yes, his misfortunes," said Grandmother. "Paul, you have spoiled Clara. During all these years you have given in to her in most things, you have indulged her in all things. Now it is her turn."

"Don't be hard on her, mother," he answered restlessly. "She has done as well as she knew how. She had a right to expect to be a little extravagant. I was a rich man when I married her, and I should have been a rich man now if I hadn't been such a fool as to speculate as I have done. At first I was glamoured by the prospect of doubling my income. And when that venture failed I hoped to put everything straight by succeeding next time. Ah yes, you may shake your head, mother. I understand all you would say."

"Does Roy Kingston know?" asked Grandmother.

"Yes. I let him in for a goodish bit too in this affair, poor fellow. And that's one thing that cuts me horribly. I wanted him to put off his marriage in the meantime. But he was rather obstinate about it."

"I think it better that his marriage should not be put off any longer," said the old lady decidedly. "It will do Gwendolen no harm, dear girl, to study economy a little, at first."

"Well, well, perhaps not," answered her son with a sigh. Then he added,

"Brian seems to take it terribly to heart. Of course he knows how things are. Poor lad, it's hard on him too, of course. It would have been better for him if he had stuck to the church, after all."

Grandmother stroked his hand softly.

"Don't look so despairing, dear boy," she said in the sweet half-crooning voice that had soothed his childhood's troubles many a time. "You have been unfortunate, and perhaps foolish. But no one can say you have been dishonourable."

"No, thank God!" he answered, straightening himself suddenly. "And if the worst comes to the worst, we can but begin again. But—how on earth I shall tell Clara, I don't know."

"When the time comes strength will be given you," said his mother quietly. "And the worst has not come to the worst yet. Keep up your heart. Who knows what may happen, even in a day?"

"Ay—" he muttered, "there is just a chance—a very slender one——However, we shall see." Then he added,

"Well, I must go and dress. Clara is giving a dinner-party to-night."

And as he spoke Mrs. Medlicott came in, amid the rustling of trailing silk and lace.

"Dear me, Paul," she exclaimed with almost a frown on her usually placid forehead, "aren't you dressed yet? Why, the people will be here directly. Do hurry."

He went over to her, and laid both his hands gently on her uncovered shoulders.

"You look very nice, my dear," he said, his voice not quite steady. "Very nice. I remember you wore a dress of that colour the first time I saw you, more than thirty years ago." He stooped suddenly and kissed her cheek, then went out of the room.

"Well, Paul does look old of late," his wife said as the door closed after him. "I declare he might be seventy. He takes no pride in looking young and spruce. I remember my father was quite the dandy in his dress and walk until the very day before he died. But there—all men are not alike."

Grandmother's blue eyes shone frostily; for it did not please her to hear her son compared disadvantageously with the deceased pawnbroker. But she made no remark.

"I think this gown looks rather well, mother. Don't you?" went on her daughter-in-law.

"It is very handsome," said Grandmother. "Very handsome indeed. I agree with Paul that you look very well in it."

"Yes, Paul has no reason to be ashamed of his wife," observed the other complacently—"and so I often tell him. Well, I must go, mother. There are some very swell people coming to-night. And a good few of them with handles to their names. Au revoir."

"Good-night, my dear," said Grandmother.

A little later a muffled thumping at the door was followed by the entrance of Clips, struggling under the stern escort of Angela.

"I've brought Master Theodore up to you, ma'am," announced the latter, apparently somewhat out of breath. "He insists upon going into the drawing-room, and his mamma does not wish him to do so. And he won't take any notice of what Miss Lovell says."

Clips was crimson with rage, and stamped his feet in royal fury.

"You are an ugly, nasty old woman!" he shrieked excitedly. "You'll never go to Heaven and be an angel—never! So when Grandmother goes to Heaven, she'll have to do her own hair, for *you* won't be there. So now! So *now!*"

"Clips!" said Grandmother—"Clips!"

The child stopped stamping, and ran over to the sofa.

"Don't look sorry, Grandmother dear," he exclaimed all in a breath. "Don't look sorry. I love you, But I *hate* Angela!"

Angela drew herself up with dignity.

"I do!" flashed out Clips, turning round upon her suddenly. "Everybody does. The milkman says your face is enough to turn all the milk sour in Chris—christendom."

"I think, Angela, if you will go, I had better talk to Master Theodore alone," said Grandmother gravely.

Angela retired with audible sniffs of indignation, and "Master Theodore" wriggled up to Grandmother, and hid his face in her lap.

"I'm a little *beast!*" he sighed penitently.

Grandmother said nothing.

"I'll never be naughty again!" continued the culprit in accents of woe.

"I am very glad to hear that," said Grandmother quietly. "But you must tell Angela that you are sorry for the very rude things you have said to her."

"But I'm not sorry."

"Then, my dear little boy, you ought to be."

"I'll try to be," said repentant Clips. "I'll sit down and wait till I feel it coming on."

He plumped himself down upon the floor, where he sat perfectly still for perhaps a minute. Then he scrambled to his feet and made a sudden rush out of the room.

In a few minutes he returned, with an air of suppressed and outraged virtue.

"She's a cross old pig," he announced resentfully. "I went and told her I was very sorry she was old and ugly and nasty, and she just took me by the shoulders and pushed me away. I hope she won't live long."

"Clips," said Grandmother in a grieved voice, "that is a very wicked thing to say."

"Why, Grandmother? I heard her say it herself one night when she had pains. I suppose she thinks she'd go to Heaven, and nurse says there's no pain there. So you see, Grandmother dear, it wasn't such a *very* wicked thing to say."

Grandmother suppressed a smile. Really there was no doing anything with Clips.

"Now, I'm going to amuse you, Grandmother," said her small grandson, with the bland content of conscious rectitude. "Do you want to be amused?"

"Yes, Clips—I think I do."

"Shall I say you a pome?" inquired the child, knitting his brows meditatively. "I know one that Kenneth teached me. I think it's silly. But Kenneth

says all pomes are silly. Shall I say it? It makes people laugh."

"Yes, dear. Say it, by all means."

Clips folded his hands, and began in a voice of laboured solemnity:

"He thought he saw an elephant who played upon the fife;
He looked again, and saw it was a letter from his wife.
'At length I realize,' he said, 'the bitterness of life.'

"He thought he saw a buffalo, upon the mantelpiece;
He looked again, and saw it was his sister's husband's niece.
'If you don't leave the house,' he said, 'I'll send for the police.'

"He thought he saw a rattlesnake who questioned him in Greek;
He looked again, and saw it was the middle of next week.
'The thing I most regret,' he said, 'is that it cannot speak.'

"He thought he saw a banker's clerk descending from a 'bus;
He looked again, and saw it was a hippopotamus.
'Should this remain to dine,' he said, 'there won't be much for us.'

"He thought he saw a kangaroo, who turned a coffee-mill;
He looked again, and saw it was a vegetable pill.
'Were I to swallow this,' he said, 'I should be very ill.'

"He thought he saw an albatross. that fluttered round a lamp;
He looked again, and saw it was a penny postage stamp.
'You'd best be getting home,' he said, 'the nights are very damp.'"

"Didn't I remember it well, Grandmother?"

"Very well indeed, dear."

"But what does it mean?" asked the child presently.

"I think we had better ask Kenneth," said the old lady.

Just then Batty came in.

"Did you see the lord?" demanded Clips, seizing her suddenly round the waist.

"Did I see *what?*" asked Batty, amazed.

"The lord. Nurse said there was a lord coming to dinner. So I looked down through the railings, and nurse said, 'That's him.' And what do you think? It was nothing but a fat man with a bald head. Fancy that—for a lord!"

"Clips," observed Batty gravely, "nurse says you are to come to bed now. If you don't, she's going to tell father that you shut the cat and the puppy in the china-closet. They've broken five cups and four plates and a tea-pot."

Clips retired with all speed.

CHAPTER XX.

MATRIMONIAL—AND OTHERWISE.

"What is the sweetest word that mortals ken?"
A woman asked who walked between two men.
The first said, "Home"; the other, "Love is best."
And then the woman softly whispered, "Rest."

* * * *

"I AM so happy, Dulcie," said Gwendolen one day when her wedding was distant barely a week.

It was late in the afternoon, and the two girls were wending their way homewards after a couple of hours hard shopping.

"It seems so curious, you know," resumed the bride-elect, "that after all, I should find myself in love—absolutely in love—with Roy. I am a fool, my dear, an absolute fool. I feel myself blushing under my veil like a little goose of fifteen."

"Be thankful that you blush becomingly," said Dulcie. "When I blush, I blush like pickled cabbage."

"I wonder what Brian would say to that?" returned

Gwendolen. "Do you know, Dulcie, I have fancied, lately, that Brian—is rather—gone on you?"

"Do you think so?" answered Dulcie without giving her companion any indication of emotion. "Possibly being in a blissfully romantic state of mind yourself may induce you to imagine everyone else desirous of 'going and doing likewise.'"

"But I don't think poor Brian is in a blissfully romantic state. Quite the reverse."

"Shall you have your blue serge trimmed with black braid or white?" asked Dulcie tranquilly.

"I really don't care which. It is so odd, you know, to remember that when I was engaged to Roy before, I used to plan out all the various dresses I should have when I was married. And now—I don't seem to care a bit. I never can get any further than the simple fact that I am going to be Roy's wife, and that we love each other. Oh, Dulcie!—I am *glad* he is not so well off as he was, and that we are going to have a dear little unpretentious home where I can do all my own housekeeping, and help him to save money, and where I can look after his collars and stockings and everything."

Dulcie laughed softly.

"How changed you are, my dear," she said. "Can it be the same Gwendolen who——"

"Oh don't remind me of the old Gwendolen:

Perhaps she may come back soon enough. Who knows?"

"No—she will never come back," said the other.

"You think not? Ah well, for Roy's sake we will hope you are right."

They were about to cross Oxford Street when a hoarse murmur arose in the near distance, growing louder every moment, and clearer. The confused terrified galloping of horses' hoofs became more and more distinct from other galloping hoofs, even in that busy thoroughfare. For along the street an excited pair of dray horses came swinging and tearing along, scattering all in front of them. Behind followed a racing, shouting crowd.

Suddenly a girl holding a little child by the hand, darted across the street. She would have gained the other side just in time, but the child stumbled and fell. The dray, swaying from side to side, was almost upon them, when a man rushed forward and caught them into safety. He was in time for them, but not for himself. One of the shafts struck him violently, and the horses trampled over his body.

For a second he lay huddled up in the roadway, then the crowd closed round him and hid him from view.

Dulcie and Gwendolen found themselves surrounded by the rapidly spreading mob that springs up with

such mushroom-like celerity as the sequence of a street accident.

"He's a plucked 'un!" exclaimed one man enthusiastically to his companion. "Or rather he *was*. For he's stone dead now. The brutes have trampled the life out of him. He's a swell too. God bless him."

Dulcie uttered a little gasping cry, and the next moment was fighting her way through the crowd like a mad thing.

"Let me see him! Let me see him!" she panted breathlessly to all who opposed her. And they let her pass.

Some minutes later, when the mob had dispersed somewhat, and the poor crushed heap, that had been a brave human being so short a time ago, had been borne away, Gwendolen found Dulcie leaning against a shop door, ghastly pale, and shaking all over.

"It's all right," she said with chattering teeth as she clutched Gwendolen's arm. "It wasn't—it wasn't——"

"Wasn't what? Wasn't who?" exclaimed Gwendolen in bewilderment. "Good gracious, Dulcie, you are as white as a sheet. Do you mean that the poor fellow isn't dead?"

"Oh yes, he's dead," with a shudder. "But it wasn't—I thought—I was *sure*—it was your brother Brian."

And she covered her face with her hands.

For a moment Gwendolen was speechless. Then she said sharply,

"You silly thing! He wasn't the least like Brian. I saw him before he crossed the street." Then she added, "We will take a cab home."

She hailed a passing hansom, put Dulcie in, and seated herself beside her. Whereupon Dulcie broke into helpless hysterical crying.

Gwendolen took her hand and stroked it gently, as the hansom sped eastward.

"There, there, you poor thing," she whispered, her face wonderfully soft and tender. "Don't cry like that. Don't. I tell you it wasn't Brian, not even anyone like him—at least not very. Hush now, hush, my dear. You will make yourself ill."

Gradually Dulcie's sobs grew quieter.

"You—you won't tell anyone?" she murmured, clutching Gwendolen's fingers tightly.

"No, no, dearie, of course not. I understand. No wonder you were so upset."

"I—I was startled," went on poor shamefaced Dulcie nervously. "It seemed so terrible——"

She stopped, trembling violently. And just then the cab turned into Bloomsbury Square.

As they crossed the hall, the library door opened and Garry came out, his boyish face pale and startled.

"Is anything the matter, Garry?" his sister asked anxiously.

"Yes," the lad answered in a choked voice. "You'd best ask the governor. He's in there, and he'll tell you what reason he has to be proud of one of his sons."

And he went quickly upstairs.

Gwendolen, looking surprised and troubled, turned and went into the study.

Her father was sitting at the table, his head leaning on his hand. She went up to him gently. They had drawn wonderfully near to each other of late, these two.

"What is it, father, dear?" she whispered, laying her arm round his neck. "Has anything gone wrong? It is something about Garry, I know. I saw him in the hall just now."

Paul Medlicott raised his head with a sigh.

"The lad is vexed and upset," he said. "He has lost his situation in the bank—through his own folly. And I, my dear, am very worried and anxious about business matters. But we won't talk of these things now. Little girls who are going to be married must be cheerful, and not think of tears. There, there, run away and get ready for dinner."

Gwendolen kissed him regretfully and went away. As she passed Grandmother's room she opened the

door, and looked in. Garry was kneeling beside Grandmother's couch. Gwendolen could not see his face. She shut the door gently and went on her way upstairs.

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The wedding-day came and went quickly. It was the quietest of ceremonies, and as Batty ruefully remarked when the bride and bridegroom had gone, it didn't seem like a wedding at all.

Dulcie went up to Gwendolen's room to bring order out of the chaos of confusion there, crying a little the while, for she knew she should miss her friend sorely. Already the house seemed emptier without her. Then she went to Grandmother's room.

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The newly-married pair were only to be away for a week, and on the day of the home-coming Dulcie and Batty accompanied Mrs. Medlicott to West Kensington to put the bridal nest finally in order.

Angela had been there all the previous day, and had aroused serious resentment in the breast of Ann, the newly-engaged maid-of-all-work, who, as maids-of-all-work will, imagined herself to be *au fait* in most

things and all but perfect in the rest. "Minx," and "H'object," were the terms in which they mutually stigmatized each other, and only the timely arrival of the family averted a pitched battle.

Mrs. Medlicott sighed as she viewed the dainty but modest establishment.

"Ah, my dear Miss Lovell," she said to Dulcie—"it is not what I should have wished for poor Gwendolen. And to think she might have been "my lady" if she had liked. Ah well, it's little use crying over spilt milk. I'm sure I hope they'll be happy, that's all."

"I think they are sure to be happy," said Dulcie, "they love each other so."

"Yes, that's all very well. But money's money, and a title's a title. Though as far as looks go, Roy Kingston might be anybody. But looks are not everything. However, there's no saying what turn things may take. He's a shrewd enough fellow, and city men have been knighted before to-day. I may be Lady Medlicott myself before I die. And there are those who look it less," she added complacently.

Dulcie did not answer. She was a romantic little thing, and there was something that touched her keenly in this unentered Paradise which awaited its pair of wedded lovers. She began to arrange the flowers in a preoccupied dream. Did half-formed dreams of her own enter therein? Perhaps.

Batty was assisting Angela in the kitchen. Angela was a first-rate cook, which further enraged Ann. Her rage, however, was tempered with awe (since the arrival of Mrs. Medlicott) and she retired into the back-kitchen, where she flounced about to such an extent that she broke two plates, the fragments of which she immediately consigned with secret dispatch to the dust-bin.

Mrs. Medlicott occupied herself in sailing through the various rooms, and making disparaging mental inventories of their contents.

Dulcie had just finished adorning the tea-table—which was set in the dining-room—with flowers, and was standing back to admire the effect of a trail of lilies and forget-me-nots which twined artistically in and out between the dishes, when Garry came in.

The girl was struck anew by the change in his boyish face. It was a change that had been more and more marked during the past few days. She was not vain enough to put it down to his nipped-in-the-bud fancy for herself. Besides, the change dated too late for that.

Just now, however, he had assumed an air of rather exaggerated gaiety, and declared that everything looked "awfully swagger," and that "it made a fellow want to go and get married himself." Then he made

Dulcie accompany him on a tour of inspection through all the rooms, and said such funny and outrageous things that she laughed herself almost into tears. They left the little drawing-room to the last, and here Garry's gaiety seemed suddenly to desert him. He stared out of the window for some time in silence, his hands in his jacket-pockets, his foot beating the floor impatiently.

Dulcie hesitated a moment, then she said,

"Is anything the matter, Garry?"

"Oh nothing special," the lad answered bitterly. "Only I've been feeling more beastly ashamed of myself lately than I ever did before, or, I hope, am ever likely to do again."

"But why?" asked the girl.

"I may as well tell you," was the gloomy answer. "If I don't, Brian will. He's down on me as usual. I only hope he'll never go off the line himself, though I suppose that's not likely. It's a fine thing to be born perfect."

There was a sneer in his voice, and sneering had hitherto not been one of Garry's accomplishments.

"The fact is," he went on, as Dulcie did not speak —"I've been betting; and as it's against the bank rules, they've given me the sack. That's bad enough, but it's not the worst. The governor's been in awful difficulties for some time. And the long and the short

of it is that the old firm will, in all probability, go to smash in a few days. And this is the time I choose to be chucked out of the only place where I've any chance of being able to keep myself, or being anything except a great hulking beast, loafing about for the dear old man to keep. I feel as if I could put myself out of the way altogether. And by Jove, I will—if Brian says much more to me."

"It all seems very terrible," said Dulcie, giving his arm an affectionate little squeeze. "But, after all, it can't be helped. And I wouldn't take it so much to heart, if I were you, whatever Brian says. What has he said?"

"He's said a jolly sight more than he'll ever get the chance to say again," was the sullen answer.

"I suppose nothing would tempt you to do it another time—to bet, I mean," said Dulcie in a low voice.

"I should think not, indeed. But I won't get the chance. Not there, I mean. And I was just going to have my screw raised. Oh, it's confoundedly hard."

"I am awfully sorry—awfully sorry," murmured Dulcie.

"Yes, I'm sure you are. But there's no use in anyone's being sorry. The thing's done, and there's no undoing it."

"Have a jam puff," said Batty, entering at this moment with a plate of the aforesaid dainties. "Angela's just taken them out of the oven. They're raspberry."

Dulcie declined, but Garry took one in an absent kind of way, and ate it gloomily.

Just as he had finished, and Batty had removed all trace of crumbs, a sharp double-knock announced Paul Medlicott and his two eldest sons; and shortly afterwards Mr. and Mrs. Roy Kingston drove up in a four-wheeler.

Gwendolen looked radiant, and Kingston's quiet face wore a look of deep content.

When the greetings were over, and the womenkind had accompanied the bride upstairs, a hansom stopped before the house, the doors were flung open with quite an imposing crash, and a small consequential figure climbed out, paid the cabman with what appeared to be reckless munificence, judging from that worthy's expression, and knocked at the door in a fashion no Belgravian footman need have been ashamed of.

Gwendolen, who with her mother was coming downstairs as the door was opened, stopped short in surprise.

"Clips!" she exclaimed—"I thought you were in the house with a bad cold!"

"It's better," was the dignified and somewhat aggrieved answer. "I heard mother tell the cabman where to go, and I saw him on the rank afterwards, and told him to take me to the same place. I wanted to see what newly-married peoples was like."

The "newly-married peoples," reddened slightly, and Kenneth said with languid amusement,

"Where did you get the money for your cab, may we ask?"

"Money-box," was the laconic answer.

And as the party was just then augmented by Aunt Felicia and Jim Venner, they all went in to tea.

Somehow, the evening was not a success. Paul Medlicott tried hard to look cheery and put his care behind him. But he did not succeed very well. Brian's good-looking face was stern and forbidding. Garry looked unhappy, not to say sullen.

Altogether, Dulcie, for one, was not sorry when it was time to go home.

They all walked to the end of the street together, and then Dulcie found that she and Brian were comparatively alone.

"The others have gone on," he said quietly. "I will see you home."

Dulcie answered nothing. As a matter of fact she

was exceedingly angry with Brian Medlicott; for the course of conduct he had pursued towards the erring Garry during the evening, struck her as both cruel and uncalled for.

"Shall we walk for a little way?" Brian said after a brief pause. "I have something to say to you."

"Yes," she answered quickly. "I too have something to say to you."

She and Brian had become such good friends of late that she felt no diffidence in contemplating the few home-truths she had prepared for him. Therefore she opened fire at once.

"Mr. Brian," she said in a slow deliberate way that was rather more effective than indignation would have been—"do you think your manner to Garry to-night was either kind or gentlemanly?"

Brian did not speak for a minute or so; then he said in a calm voice that made Dulcie feel that she had taken an unpardonable liberty,

"I am afraid I hardly understand you, Miss Lovell."

"You do understand me," she answered, the least bit daunted. "The poor boy told me of—of his misfortune, or folly, or whatever you call it. He is breaking his heart about it. And I don't see what good your cold sarcastic snubs on every occasion can do him. But that is just your nature. You—you

seem to yourself so perfect that you can make no allowance for others—none at all."

Probably in all his life Brian Medlicott had never been spoken to in such fashion. And naturally he did not like it. Not even from this one woman who had become so dangerously dear to him. His face hardened, and his voice was icily polite as he answered,

"I do not allow my conduct to be questioned by anyone, Miss Lovell. So if you please we will drop the subject."

Dulcie turned scarlet. But she kept back the scathing reply she would have loved to give, and pressed her red lips into an unlovely line.

After a pause Brian observed coldly,

"I too have something to say to you, Miss Lovell."

"I had rather not hear it."

"Pardon me, you are about to hear it. Some time ago, I said to you what no honourable man would say to a woman unless he hoped and intended to make her his wife. I spoke to you then, because"—here his voice faltered slightly—"because my dearest wish was—that I hoped to win you for my wife." He paused; then went on,

"Since then circumstances have arisen which make it doubtful whether I have the right, in the meantime, to ask any woman to marry me. You have shown

me to-night, however, that any hopes I may have had were absolutely without foundation, I——"

"Mr. Brian!" Dulcie interrupted him confusedly. "Mr. Brian—you must not think—I hope you have not thought——"

"I have thought nothing," he answered curtly.

They were passing a gas-lamp, and she saw that he was very pale. A sudden remorse took hold of her.

"Do you think," she murmured—"that if you loved me, I would let you give me up for *that!* I know—I have heard——"

"If I loved you?" he repeated. "It is because I love you that I——"

He stopped, and hailed a passing four-wheeler. Having put her in, he gave the direction to the cabman, and saying briefly to Dulcie, "I shall walk home," lifted his hat and walked away.

Dulcie's feelings were not easily analyzed. So she did not try.

CHAPTER XXI.

GREY AND GOLD.

"I cried, 'No heart is true!
The sky has lost its sun;
The earth is cold and desolate
I would that life were done!'
A hand was clasped in mine,
Two hearts for ever one;
Now earth and sky in beauty shine,
My life has just begun!"

* * * * * *

IN Grandmother's room there was a sound of monotonous crying. Paul Medlicott was standing at the window, looking out drearily. These sobs and tears were like so many stabs to his kindly heart.

It was in Grandmother's room that he had chosen to tell his wife of the impending disaster. For he had a curious feeling that he would be better able to bear her lamentations and upbraidings here than in his dingy little room downstairs. They were rather bad to bear anywhere.

Presently Mrs. Medlicott sat up and dried her eyes.

"To think that after all it should come to this!" she murmured sobbingly—"that we should be turned out of house and home——"

"You forget," her husband interrupted her wearily —"that this house is my mother's."

"Well, it's more by good luck than good management if it is," she answered fretfully. "You always managed badly, Paul. You know you did. You would have been knighted before to-day, and I would have at least been 'my lady' before I died, if you had only been more pushing, and had a better eye to the main chance. But all hope of *that's* gone. And after all the good society I have cultivated. And the pains I have taken to keep up with the best. Oh, dear, it's like a nightmare."

"I cannot answer your reproaches, my dear," he answered with a patience that was infinitely touching, considering all things. "But I think if we tried to bear this together—it would be easier, perhaps. It is—it is a terrible blow to me too, Clara." His voice shook a little, and his eyes grew dim.

All this time Grandmother had remained silent. But now she said quietly,

"By and bye, when Clara has had time to get over the first shock of this trouble, she will bear it better, Paul, and help you to bear it too."

"Oh, I'll have enough to do bearing things for

myself," broke out Mrs. Medlicott with a fresh burst of sobs. "It's too dreadful for anything. How can we go on living here, if we have to send away half the servants, and let everyone see we've come down in the world?"

At this inauspicious moment Aunt Felicia popped in.

"Good gracious, what's the matter?" she exclaimed, looking from one perturbed face to another. "Why, Clara, your eyes are like cherries!"

"Matter enough!" wailed her sister-in-law. "Your brother has ruined us all, and your mother seems to think I ought to rejoice at it. I'm sure I'll never be able to hold up my head again. And everyone thought I was making such a capital match. I might as well have taken the offer I had the same day as Paul's. I would at least——"

"I think, Clara," put in Grandmother in a cold clear voice that cut like steel—"that you might spare us the recital of your former lovers in the meantime."

It was very rarely that Grandmother spoke in this way. When she did, it was usually with good reason.

Meanwhile, Aunt Felicia had been rapidly questioning her brother; and she now said in her chirping bird-like voice,

"Pooh, pooh! what a fuss about nothing! As far

as I can make out there's still a chance that things may not be so bad. And if the worst comes to the worst, you won't be the first nor the last that's come to grief—not by a long way. Cheer up, all of you. I declare, you've even got mother looking like a boiled owl. As for you, Clara, you're nothing but a big baby—though you are a couple of years older than Paul. Oh yes, you are. You needn't flush up like that. And you'll look it, too, and more—if you cry yourself into a limp rag over every misfortune that comes. Why, look what a good time you've had, until now! You haven't lost a single child. None of them ever had anything but the mildest forms of scarlet-fever, and chicken-pox, and measles and all the ills that children are heirs to. Your eldest daughter is married to a good, kind, respectable man. And your sons are all turning out well. Why, you've never even had a burglary in the house, nor the kitchen chimney on fire, nor the pipes frozen. Even if you and Paul had to go out and sweep a crossing, you've had so much good luck hitherto, that you'd have no manner of right to complain."

"Felicia, Felicia," remonstrated Grandmother. "You let your tongue run away with you."

"Ah, well, it's the only thing that ever wanted to run away with me," chirped her irrepressible daughter

One evening Paul Medlicott sent for Dulcie to go to him in the library.

"My dear Miss Lovell," he said, "I am going to say what pains me very deeply, for you have seemed so much one of ourselves of late that we shall sadly miss you——"

"Miss me?" interrupted the girl in an agitated voice. "Are you going to send me away, then?"

"It is not a question of choice," he answered gravely but kindly. "Unfortunately, there is no alternative. We shall have to retrench in many ways, and I am afraid, my dear young lady, that you are one of the luxuries we can no longer afford."

"Oh, I am so sorry—so sorry!" she said desolately. "Clips is getting on so nicely. And Batty——" Here her voice broke. "Can't I stay without any salary in the meantime?" she entreated, her dark eyes heavy with unshed tears. "I shouldn't mind it, not at all. I can't bear to go away. You have all been so very, very kind to me."

"I could not think of that," he answered with a touched inflection in his tired voice. "But believe me, I shall be glad to do anything in my power to recommend you to any other post."

And here Dulcie wept unrestrainedly. As soon as she could she escaped from the room, and rushing

towards the schoolroom, ran full into the arms of Brian, who, as a matter of fact, had just been looking for her.

He drew her into the empty schoolroom, and closed the door.

"What is the matter?" he asked in a tenderly authoritative voice. "Tell me."

"Oh, I am to be sent away!" she sobbed despairingly.

Brian had not yet let her hands go, and now he drew her suddenly nearer to him.

"Dulcie," he said in a quick underbreath. "Dulcie, don't cry so."

"I must!" she answered, still sobbing. "I must. I don't want to go. I've been so happy here. I could do things to help. I really could. And I don't want any salary——"

All at once he took her in his arms. He felt that she did not resist, and that she was trembling violently.

"Dulcie," he whispered, bending his head to hers—"why are you so troubled? Is it—is it——"

"No, no"—she cried—"it is not that—not that at all——"

"Not what, Dulcie? Listen, dear. When I told you the other night that I could no longer look forward to the hope that you might be my wife, it

was because I feared that there was nothing but ruin ahead for us all. But now I see a prospect of better things. Dulcie—if you care for me enough to wait for me a year—or perhaps a little longer—will you let me claim you then?"

"But—but do I care?" she stammered, bathed in blushes.

He turned her face gently towards him, and kissed her lips.

"I think you do," he said tenderly. "Though you said some very hard things to me not long ago."

"I am sorry," she murmured.

"You need not be sorry," he answered touching her hot cheek lightly with his fingers. "If I remember aright, they were all painfully true. Unpleasant things usually are."

"What will your mother say?" she sighed presently.

Brian answered nothing for a second or two. Then he said,

"Grandmother will be pleased."

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Grandmother was pleased. She and Dulcie had a long talk in the gloaming on the following evening, when the girl went in to read to her, as she sometimes did if they were alone.

"I am very glad, my dear," the old lady said. "Very glad indeed. Come here and kiss me."

"How did you know?" murmured Dulcie.

"Brian told me last night. Now you must look upon me indeed as Grandmother."

"I think I always have," the girl answered lovingly.

There was no reading that evening. Dear Grandmother!—she was as pleased and interested as a child in her favourite grandson's happiness. More than an hour afterwards, Dulcie, going slowly downstairs, was seized by Garry.

"I say, Miss Lovell," he exclaimed excitedly, "come into the schoolroom. I've something most awfully jolly to tell you."

He half dragged, half led her into the schoolroom, and shut the door.

"Now just you listen to the most stunning thing. Jim Venner's uncle has got me a place in a bank in Manchester, where I'm to have half as much screw again as I had before. Isn't it scrumptious? I tell you I could stand on my head in the middle of the Square at this moment."

"I'm most awfully glad!" exclaimed Dulcie heartily.

"Of course I'll have to leave London," he continued. "But that can't be helped."

Just then the door was flung hastily open, and Clips entered in keen excitement.

"Miss Lovell! Miss Lovell!" he shouted at the top of his healthy young voice. "I heard nurse tell cook that you are going to be Mrs. Brian. *Are* you, Miss Lovell? And shall you have a nice little house like Gwendolen and Mr. Kingston? And can I come to stay, and have cakes and sweets and apples?"

Here he was seized by Garry and deposited outside the door.

"Are you really going to marry Brian?" asked Garry slowly, when they were once more alone. "I suppose you are, or you wouldn't be blushing like that. Well, I hope you'll be awfully happy, you know, and all that kind of thing. But I'm not exactly sure about it. However, I suppose you like him. And any bat could have seen he was gone on you." He paused, then added somewhat shamefacedly,

"I suppose you won't—at least I mean we'd rather you didn't tell him that Jim and me made two such blooming asses of ourselves, you know."

"Why, of course I should never dream of it!" said Dulcie earnestly. "How could you think I should be so mean?"

"Oh, some girls would, you know. But of course I might have known you'd be different. I say, I wonder what Jim will say when he hears you're

engaged to Brian? He was harder hit than me, you know."

"I don't think either of you were *very* hard hit," said Dulcie with a small malicious smile.

"Oh, yes, we were. By the way, Jim Venner's got into his new rooms, and he wants you and me and Batty to go one afternoon and have tea with him. We'll have to ask Gwendolen too, because Jim says there must be a married lady to chaperone. I don't see why myself, but of course that's neither here nor there. You know, I believe things are going to look up all round," he went on after a brief silence. "Brian and the governor don't look a quarter as gloomy the last day or two. Kenneth's the only one who seems down on his luck, though I don't know why he should be."

Dulcie said nothing. She too had noticed of late that good-looking languid Kenneth had undoubtedly "something on his mind," as she put it. And she had a vague certainty that this "something" was of an essentially private nature, and unconnected with fortunes of the family.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN WHICH KENNETH DISPLEASES HIS FAMILY.

"Is it worth while that you jostle a brother
Bearing his load in the rough road of life?
Is it worth while that we jeer at each other
In blackness of heart? That we war to the knife?
God pity us all in our pitiful strife!"

Joaquin Miller.

KENNETH, in Grandmother's room, was making startling confessions. They were alone, and Grandmother's gentle face was troubled.

"You see, Grandmother," Kenneth was saying in his soft monotonous voice, "I married her about six months ago. Yes, of course I know it was rather idiotic, as far as my somewhat precarious prospects go. But I was awfully gone on her—am now, for that matter—and she was such a dear lonely little thing, and—oh well, there you are, you know. And hitherto my allowance has done very well, for she

isn't extravagant, in fact she manages marvellously. But now, of course, the governor can't go on making me an allowance; and quite just he shouldn't, as things are. And what the deuce I'm to do I don't know."

"But, my dear boy, why not have told your father in the first place?"

"Couldn't. You know the row the mater would have made. She would have had a fit at the idea of her son marrying a girl who had served behind a shop counter."

Grandmother winced, for the idea did not commend itself to her either.

"What kind of shop?" she asked.

"Glove-shop," was the curt answer.

"What is she like?" she said after a pause.

"Small and dark, with big pathetic eyes. She has nice hands too," he added artfully. For he knew Grandmother had a weakness for pretty hands. And her own were perfect.

"I wish you could see her," he continued. "I know you would like her. And you could break it to the governor."

Grandmother's delicate face flushed.

"I am not at all sure," she said quietly—"that I want to see her."

"I know you haven't it in you to be down on a

fellow when everyone else is sure to be," resumed her grandson in that wonderfully wheedling voice of his. "Couldn't we manage it somehow, Grandmother—without anyone knowing, I mean?"

"I don't very well see how," the old lady answered drily. "It would look rather strange for you to bring an unknown young woman to the house without explaining her in any way."

Kenneth pulled his moustache thoughtfully.

"Yes, so it would," he admitted. "And perhaps it would hardly be worth while to risk it. After all, the governor can't do anything for me just now. So perhaps we'd better leave it. Only somehow I felt I'd give almost anything if Winifred could have a quiet talk with you. You see, she hasn't been quite well, of late, and she gets depressed—though as a rule she's the cheeriest little soul alive."

"Where is she living?" asked Grandmother.

"In rooms at West Kensington. Poky little rooms they are, too. But it was the best I could do."

"Has she given up her situation?"

"Of course. Why, Grandmother, you don't suppose I'd allow my wife to serve behind a counter?"

"I did not know," said Grandmother in a quiet voice.

Kenneth flushed slightly, then continued,

"She has been writing one or two little things for

magazines. And one of them has been accepted. I have sent several articles to various papers myself. But so far, the result has been *nil*."

"She must be lonely," said Grandmother under her breath. And her voice quivered.

Kenneth caught her hand and kissed it.

"You dear sweet soul!" he murmured.

But she drew her hand away.

"I think you have behaved very badly, Kenneth," she said.

"I'm afraid I have," was the humble answer. "But it can't be helped now. Oh, Grandmother, it's a puzzling world."

"That is a very trite remark, my dear. And I find it is usually made by people who have themselves to blame for their puzzles."

"I suppose," said Kenneth, passing over this gentle snub in silence, "that it would be no use asking Gwendolen to go and see her. It's only a few minutes' walk from their house."

"I'm afraid not. And yet I don't know. Why not ask her?"

"Gwendolen is so queer," he returned, getting up and walking restlessly about the room. "One never knows where one has her."

"Shall I try to arrange it?"

"I should be awfully glad if you would. But

ask her not to speak of it in the meantime, you know."

* * * * * * *

Now Gwendolen, being still in a sufficiently romantic mood herself, made no objections when Grandmother put the matter before her some days later. Indeed she professed herself quite willing, nay, anxious—to interview her new sister-in-law.

Grandmother, owing to certain earnest entreaties on the part of Kenneth, had consented, somewhat against her will, to temporarily suppress the fact of Mrs. Kenneth Medlicott's previous occupation.

One fair summer day, therefore, Gwendolen donned one of her smart trousseau gowns and made her way to Illingham Terrace.

She was shown up to a sitting-room on the second floor; a small room, sweet with the scent of heliotrope, a flourishing plant of which stood on a side-table. The window was open, and the blinds half lowered.

As Gwendolen came in a girl of about her own age rose from a table where she had been writing.

"You are my brother Kenneth's wife?" Gwendolen said hesitatingly.

"I guess so," was the answer. And though the

lips were pretty, the accent was decidedly trans-atlantic. "You are Mrs. Roy Kingston, I suppose? Kenneth told me you were coming one day this week. I'm real glad to see you. Won't you sit down?"

Gwendolen sat down, her hostess did likewise, and each mentally took stock of the other.

Gwendolen wore a dark green costume of faultless cut and style, her fair hair surmounted by a broad velvet hat of the same colour. Her shoes and gloves were perfect, and altogether she was very good to look at.

Kenneth's wife wore a black serge skirt, and a white cotton blouse, both smartly made. Her soft dark hair was gathered into a knot at the back of her head, and the middle finger of her right hand was stained with ink. She had a small rather long face, half pert, half wistful, and her eyes were long-lashed and lovable.

"It was sweet of you to come," she said, concluding with a sigh her swift inspection of her visitor's appearance.

"I wanted to come," returned the other. "You know as we are sisters, we ought not to be strangers."

"That's so," assented Mrs. Kenneth. "But some girls wouldn't look upon it in that way. I can see *now—it* was wrong of me to marry your brother."

"If you loved him it was right of you to marry him," said the bride of a month or two.

A soft dimness came into the dark-haired woman's eyes.

"May I tell you about myself?" she asked.

"I should like it very much," Gwendolen answered sincerely.

Kenneth's wife looked out of the window for a few minutes without speaking. Then she said,

"Mother and I came to London from New York three years ago. We thought it would be cheaper living here than over there, for father had just died and left us pretty poor. When we'd been here some time mother was taken very ill, and we had to pay a lot for doctors and medicines. She grew worse and worse—it got to be a long wasting illness—and I had to look out for some work to do, or we should have got fearfully into debt, and the thought of that drove mother half wild. I answered advertisement after advertisement, for all kinds of things. But they all wanted previous experience, and I had none. At last I got desperate. And one day when mother was very ill, and the landlady very cheeky because we owed her five weeks' rent, I saw an advertisement in an evening paper for a respectable young woman to serve in a glove-shop. So I went and saw the people—a young man and his wife who had

just begun business. They hesitated a little at first because of my want of experience. But at last they engaged me."

She paused. Gwendolen's face had deepened in colour. But she said nothing.

The other went on,

"I remained there until six months ago, when your brother married me. He used to come to the shop for gloves and things; and he was always very kind and nice to me—not like any of the others. And at the time my mother died he noticed my black dress and red eyes, and seemed kinder than ever. And once or twice I met him in the street after that, and he was real good. And then—well, after a time he asked me to marry him. At first I said no, and then at last I said yes. For I was real fond of him, even then—though not a quarter as fond of him as I am now."

Another pause. Still Gwendolen was silent. Mrs. Kenneth's cheeks flushed up.

"I told my husband I would tell you this, though he didn't want me to," she said rapidly. "And I shall tell it to every one of his family who comes here, though I daresay you are the last as well as the first. But I'm not going to sail under false colours, and if my husband's people are ashamed of me, they can leave me alone. For I haven't done

anything to be ashamed of, and I won't be looked down upon."

Her eyes almost flashed as she spoke, and the colour in her cheeks was something pretty to see.

Then impulsive Gwendolen leaned forward and took both the other's hands in hers.

"I should not think of looking down on you," she said earnestly. "I think you have behaved very pluckily. And," she added, "I'm sure you must be good and sweet, or Kenneth would never have cared for you. I was shocked—just now—at first. You don't mind my saying that, do you? But I think we shall be friends as well as sisters. Will you kiss me, Winifred?"

"Will I kiss you?" answered Winifred in somewhat hysterical fashion. "I've been dying to kiss you ever since you came in!"

Whereupon they kissed each other and cried a little.

Then they had tea together, and talked of many things. Gwendolen found that her brother's wife had both thought and read very deeply for her years and opportunities. The same problems interested both. They were in sympathy in fifty things. Hours passed, and at length, Gwendolen, looking at her watch, found that it was considerably later than she could have thought possible.

"I shall talk to Grandmother about you," she said, as she took leave of her bright-eyed hostess. "She will make everything right. And don't forget that we are near neighbours. I shall expect you the day after to-morrow. Good-bye."

* * * * * * *

Mrs. Medlicott took the news of her son's marriage much more quietly than anyone had expected.

"Of course, I suppose you had a right to please yourself, Kenneth," she said in her stateliest manner. "And if Brian likes to marry a girl without a penny, and you like to marry a shop-girl, I can only hope that you may both be happy, though I don't think there's much chance of it. Where my children get their queer ideas from, I don't know. Don't bring her here in the meantime, until I get more accustomed to the idea. Your father and Gwendolen seem taken with her; but that's not to say I shall be. Then I suppose you're going to take up your abode with your wife now? I must say I think it would have shown more spirit if you'd done it sooner."

Kenneth said nothing. He hated rows, and he momentarily expected the cab which was to convey himself and his portmanteaus to West Kensington.

So he only shrugged his shoulders and lit a cigarette. Dinner was just over, and the above interview had taken place in a small room off the hall, which the sons of the house used as a smoking-room.

Mrs. Medlicott's exit was followed by the entrance of Brian, who had only that morning been made aware of his brother's *mésalliance.* His remarks upon the subject were such as roused Kenneth to unwonted indignation.

"What do you mean?" he asked, taking his cigarette from his mouth and looking Brian straight in the eyes.

"I simply mean," said the other, "that you have made a fool of yourself, and disgraced the whole family; and all for a girl of whom you will probably tire in six months."

"That is my business, I imagine," returned Kenneth hotly. "What the deuce is it to you, whom I marry?"

Brian shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothing in the world," he said in a cool even voice. "Except that I object to being connected with a person who may turn out—hardly desirable."

"Well, we'll hope she won't turn out to be another man's wife," replied Kenneth with stinging emphasis.

Brian turned perfectly white.

"That is a piece of abominable insolence!" he said between his shut teeth.

"Not at all," answered the other fiercely. "It is only a hint that those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. However, we'll drop the subject, if you please. As to-night is the last night I shall be an inmate of this house, it seems rather unnecessary to celebrate it by a row."

He went out of the room, and Brian, still with a very ugly look on his face, went in search of Dulcie.

He found her in the schoolroom, pasting coloured scraps into a calico book, in accordance, it seemed, with a promise made to Clips, who had retired to rest.

She looked up with a bright little nod as he came in.

"Ah, come and talk to me while I finish this," she said. "I want it to be ready for Clips to-morrow. I promised him it should."

He drew a chair to the table and sat down.

"Has anything vexed you?" asked Dulcie presently, recognizing certain storm signals.

"Yes. I am annoyed—intensely annoyed—about this disgraceful marriage of Kenneth's."

"Disgraceful?" she echoed. "I didn't know there was anything disgraceful about it."

"Do you know what she was?"

"I know that she had to work for her living, as I have, only in a different way."

"I beg you will not for an instant compare yourself with her, Dulcie."

"Are you in a lecturing mood, my lord? Because if so, I shall send you away."

He got up and walked about the room, while Dulcie went on,

"Gwendolen says she is charming. And I hope to know her myself soon."

"That I distinctly forbid," returned her lover, more hastily than discreetly.

Her eyes flashed.

"You forget that as yet you have no right to forbid me anything," she answered.

"I have the right of your affianced husband," was the haughty answer.

"I do not recognize that right," she said in a slow deliberate voice that meant mischief, only Brian did not know it.

"Are you developing into the New Woman?" he asked with a disagreeable smile.

"I don't know. I hope I have always been an intelligent being, with the power of discerning right and wrong for myself."

"There are matters in which the man must judge for the woman—the husband for the wife."

"I am not your wife yet. You seem to forget that."

"I do not forget it. If you were—" He stopped and shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Yes—if I were?" she asked, regarding him with steady eyes.

"If you were, I should see that my wishes were carried out unquestioningly."

"Yes?"—with ominous sweetness. "You mean your domestic rule to be an absolute monarchy, then?"

"Most assuredly I do."

"Ah! That sounds very fascinating. I am very glad to know that," she said slowly. Her eyes were sparkling, and her cheeks were brilliant.

"You understand, then, that I do not wish you to know my brother's wife," resumed Brian, sitting down again, and taking her hand gently in his.

But she drew it away.

"You understand me?" he repeated.

"I understand you, of course."

"And you intend to do as I ask you?"

"You have not asked me to do anything special, I think."

"Dulcie—you shall not fence with me in this way——"

She put down her scissors, and turned towards *him deliberately.*

"I should like to tell you, Brian," she said, her voice trembling a little, "that you are not taking the right way with me. I may be led, but I will not be driven. And unless you recognize that, we shall never get on together. Indeed, I have often thought of late that perhaps——"

"That perhaps what?"—he asked sternly as she paused. Then his face and voice softened.

"Are we going to quarrel, Dulcie?" he said. "And over such a trifle?"

"It is not a trifle," she answered stubbornly. "And even if it were, life is full of trifles, and it is over them that people do quarrel."

"Dulcie—a little while ago you would not have spoken to me in this way."

"Perhaps not. A little while ago I thought you were—different."

He looked deeply hurt and surprised; and she added hastily,

"I wish you would go away, Brian. You are not in a good temper, and neither am I."

"I am in a perfectly good temper," he said in a voice which certainly belied his words. "And I shall remain here until I have said all I have to say to you."

Whereupon Miss Lovell rose and went out of the room.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DOMICILE OF JIM.

"Laugh, and the world laughs with you.
Weep and you weep alone.
For this brave old earth must borrow its mirth,
It has trouble enough of its own.

"Rejoice, and men will seek you.
Grieve, and they turn and go.
They want full measure of all your pleasure,
But do not want your woe."

E. Wheeler Wilcox.

JIM VENNER had taken a couple of very nice rooms just off Kensington High Street. To-day he was very busy putting them to rights in view of his projected tea-party.

Not that to the casual eye they appeared to want any putting to rights; but when the girl of one's heart is expected to honour one's domicile, it is necessary to be ultra-particular.

That screen, for instance, would it not look better in the other corner? Why, yes, of course. And this little statuette ought to catch the light from a

different point of view. And this little group of etched grotesques by Aubrey Beardsley ought to hang a little to the left of this old brass plate.

Garry Medlicott had called the brass plate a warming-pan, and the grotesques "tommy-rot." But then Garry had no artistic tendencies (save where music was concerned), and Jim had many. Jim had also an allowance ample enough to indulge his artistic tendencies. Here too Garry was lamentably deficient.

Our young host was still rather "gone" on Dulcie and wondered what she would think of his quaintly-furnished sitting-room, and if its quaintness would appeal to her. As a final touch he placed a small terra-cotta basket filled with creamy roses on a curious old oak cabinet. Then he sat down and lit a cigarette in feverish satisfaction, while his eyes wandered critically over the tea-table, embellished with really exquisite china, curious old silver, and cakes the most delectable.

"I wish I had got some sweets," he murmured. "I'm sure she likes them. What an ass I am."

Just then the expected party, escorted by Garry, trooped in, and almost filled the little room. Jim welcomed them with a considerable accession of colour, and each guest took what appeared to him or her the most comfortable chair in the place.

Dulcie found herself regarding Jim Venner with positive affection, as he did the honours of his small domain. He looked so boyishly lovable, and yet there was a certain growing manly dignity about him too.

"Isn't it uncommon swagger?" observed Garry, who regarded the place as his own. "Why, Jim, old man, your other rooms weren't a patch on these."

"No. Oh, I'm very comfortable here," Jim answered slowly. "But—there's always a 'but,' you know—my landlady, Mrs. Tabb, leaves something to be desired. She is—er—a little peculiar. I'm not quite sure if she's rather mad, or given to—er—imbibing, you know." Then lowering his voice, while Garry grinned, he added,

"I've only been here about ten days, you know; but she's becoming an awful nuisance already."

"How?" inquired Dulcie with interest.

"Well, you see," here Jim coloured slightly, "she persists in bringing her work here in the evenings, when I'm at home, and bothering me with all her family affairs. And she brings up packages of cracked china ornaments that she wants to sell—I've got a shelf in that cupboard crammed with them."

"Do you mean to say you're such a flat as to buy them?" asked Garry derisively.

Jim nodded with rueful acquiescence.

"She cries, you know," he said.

"By Jove, I call that playing it rather low down," remarked Garry. "Is she good-looking, Jim?"

"Good-looking!" echoed his friend in a disgusted voice. "I wish you saw her."

"Is she young?" inquired Gwendolen, preparing to pour out the tea.

"Our united ages would about fit her, I fancy," returned Jim. "Now, Garry, help to hand the things."

"Shall you have to leave these rooms when you are married?" asked Batty, who had been roaming about on a tour of inspection.

"When I'm married?" repeated the person addressed. "There isn't much chance of that, I'm afraid. You're a romantic little goose, Batty. I shouldn't wonder if you become a famous novelist."

At this point an interruption occurred. The door opened, and an elderly female with a slightly disarranged *coiffure* and a singular smile appeared on the threshold.

"Did you ring, Mr. Venner?" inquired this apparition in a husky uncertain voice.

"No, I did not, Mrs. Tabb," Jim replied. "But as you are here, I think we will have a little more milk."

"It was cream as was in that pitcher, sir," was the reproving answer. "And as such it will be charged in the bill."

"Well, whatever it was, we'll have a little more of it, please."

Mrs. Tabb took the milk-jug, looked into it pensively, and observed,

"I hope you're having a pleasant time with your friends, Mr. Venner?"

Jim concealed his surprise, and made no answer. Batty giggled. Gwendolen looked haughty, Dulcie amused, and Garry profoundly interested.

"It's a beautiful thing to see young people enjoying of themselves," continued Mrs. Tabb with a deep sigh.

"Did you say you were going to send for some more milk, Jim?" inquired Gwendolen sweetly.

"Ah, yes, Mrs. Tabb, we shall be obliged if you will let us have a little more," hastily put in Jim. "I — in fact, Mrs. Tabb, I had ordered cream. Possibly you may find it downstairs."

"Whatever is downstairs shall be brought, Mr. Venner," was the dignified answer. "Though I shall have to bring it up myself, through my domestic being out, and it sometimes being inconvenient lodgers having company."

"We have no objection in the world to your

bringing it up," observed Garry blandly, "so long as it is brought up. Allow me." And he held the door open with a low bow.

Mrs. Tabb retired, and after a pause the tea-party broke into wild laughter. All except Jim, who did not laugh, but raged inwardly at this scene in the presence of his divinity.

Some minutes passed, but the "cream" came not.

At last from without was heard a sound of muffled sobbing. With a tragic expression Jim opened the door and looked out, to discover Mrs. Tabb on a chair in the passage, weeping copiously.

"Good Heavens, Mrs. Tabb, what on earth is the matter?" asked the young fellow impatiently. "Have you brought the cream?"

"No, indeed, Mr. Venner, which I've no heart to bring cream," wailed this elderly Niobe. "Being cut to the very vitals by the crewel sounds of ribald lafture which I have heard ensuing from your room. For twenty years 'ave I lived in this 'ouse, and never before has ridicule attacked me. It is too much, Mr. Venner. You had better take your friends and your lafture elsewhere."

Then Jim lost his temper.

"Now look here, Mrs. Tabb," he said sternly, "this is beyond a joke. If you don't leave off crying

directly and go downstairs, I'll pack up my traps and leave to-night."

Mrs. Tabb dried her eyes in a hurry and caught up the milk-jug, which had been reposing temporarily on the floor.

"Not without a fortnight's notice, Mr. Venner," she exclaimed shrilly. "Not from this 'ouse. You may put upon some pore widows, but not upon Mary Tabb."

Then she added tearfully,

"Which if you had been in your usual genial and 'evinly mood, Mr. Venner, I might have asked you for a slight advance, for ready money is a thing no female can do without. But *now*, sir, I would perish first. *Perish*, Mr. Venner!"

"Mrs. Tabb," put in Garry, appearing suddenly at the door, "may I offer you my arm downstairs? You look far from strong, and I fear any excitement is bad for you. I shall be happy to bring the —er—cream. It will save you coming up again."

"Which I shall be thankful, sir," answered the gratified Mrs. Tabb. "I know a gentleman when I see one, I hope, and could wish others was the same."

With which slightly ambiguous remark she took Garry's arm in a very stately manner, and allowed herself to be conducted to the regions below.

"My dear boy," said Gwendolen, addressing Jim with a matronly anxiety that amused him mightily, "you must leave these rooms at once. That is a dreadful creature. Why she is not—I am certain she is not sober."

Garry appeared at this moment with the cream-jug.

"If at any time I should want rooms," he said gravely, "I am to have them here on the lowest possible terms. Because anyone can see with 'alf an eye that I am a gentleman; and a gentleman *is* a gentleman, come what may."

"Oh, hang it, don't let us speak of the old beast," exclaimed Jim impatiently. "I'm sure I don't know what you must all think——"

"I don't think anything," put in Dulcie equably, "except that I want some more tea. I shouldn't mind if I were you, Mr. Venner. Why, we had a cook at home who was hardly ever sober, and she said and did far more alarming things than your Mrs. Tabb."

"What kind of things?" inquired Batty.

"Well, for one thing, she brought a red-hot poker into the dining-room while we were at breakfast, and laid it on the table. And another time she brought a leg of mutton into the drawing-room when we had callers, and asked mother if she could guess what it weighed."

"What a soothing person," laughed Gwendolen. "But I believe Jim's Mrs. Tabb is capable of all that, and more. Will anyone have any more tea? No? Then let us all sit round the window. I do envy you this window, Jim. It is so lively. Look, Dulcie, there is old Miss Wisper. Why, she has got on a totally new bonnet! She must have bought it at one of the summer sales."

"Why can't we buy things at summer sales?" asked Garry of Jim sadly. "We never get our hats or clothes any cheaper because it's going to be spring or autumn. It's a fraud. Fancy, Jim, 'suit of light tweed dittoes, given away at half price in consequence of the coming season. Black bowlers offered at one and sixpence three farthings, owing to the prevailing taste for brown bowlers.' However, I suppose it will come, when the Woman of the Future finds shopping at sales beneath her dignity."

"What do you know about the Woman of the Future?" asked Dulcie laughing.

"More than I want to. I went in to supper with one at the Stimsons' party. I know she was one, because she told me. Oh, Lord!"

"I have an idea," said Jim suddenly. "As none of us are going to be out of town this summer, and as Garry doesn't leave for another fortnight, suppose we have a series of afternoons up the river? It

looks as if it would be fine for a week or so. Let's fix a day now. Why not Saturday, and then Kingston could come too."

"And why not have Kenneth and his wife?" supplemented Garry. "I like what I've seen of that little woman."

"She is a dear," assented Gwendolen heartily. "I know she would enjoy it. And so should I."

"Do you suppose Brian would care to come?' asked Garry, addressing Dulcie.

"I don't know," she said, with a curious smile. "We could ask him."

"Well, I'll see about the boat," announced Jim. "And we'll fix it for Saturday."

"And I should like it to be clearly understood," observed Garry, "that we will dispense with the company of Master Clips."

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHAT HAPPENED UP THE RIVER.

"Does anyone see what we have in the heart,
To love and to hate;
Of life's every motive an intricate part
Of chance and of fate;
The mem'ry of kisses, of starlight, of songs,
Of roses and snow,
Of women's sweet eyes, of prayers, and of wrongs,
Does anyone know?"

* * * * * *

NOTHING could have been more auspicious than the weather on the day of the river picnic. Warm, but not too warm; a suspicion of a breeze; a faintly blue sky. What more could one desire?

Dulcie and Batty, accompanied by Garry and Jim, started from Gower Street with wraps and baskets, and a generally festive air which interested even casual on-lookers. They seized upon an empty third-class carriage, and—as far as Batty and the two young men were concerned—filled up the windows with such diabolical smiles that they were left to

themselves until they were joined at Addison Road by Gwendolen and Kingston and Kenneth's wife. Kenneth himself, the latter explained, was very busy and unable to come. Brian was to join them at Richmond.

Now it so happened that Brian was not aware that Mrs. Kenneth was to form one of the party, and his face, when he joined his relatives at Richmond, was something to see. He bowed with stiff politeness when Gwendolen introduced him to Winifred, conscious that Dulcie was watching him with disapproving eyes.

Dulcie, like a little minx as she was, walked over to Winifred and put her arm through hers. Winifred looked pleased.

"You are Dulcie, are you not?" she said in her pretty impulsive way. "Kenneth has told me of you, and that we are to be sisters. I am real glad. I like your face. But I wonder if you will mind my saying," she added, glancing at Brian, and lowering her voice, "that I don't think you will have such an easy-going husband as I have. Now you aren't vexed, are you?"

"No, not at all," the other answered with a funny little smile.

The boat, which was roomy enough, and quite luxurious in the way of cushions—just held them

all comfortably. Garry and Jim were oarsmen. Brian occupied the bow, a cigar between his lips, and upon his face a singularly unamiable expression. Kingston and the feminine portion of the company occupied the stern.

The two young matrons looked very fair and lovable in their fresh holland gowns and sailor hats. Dulcie, in crisp pink cotton, was quite at her best, and Batty, as Garry facetiously observed, looked like a contented partridge. She had a lead pencil between her teeth and a chapter of her beloved story in her hand.

"How's Fabian getting on, Batty?" asked Jim good-naturedly, when they were well on their way.

"Oh, I've just finished the chapter where he and Laura were cast away upon a desert island," said the author gravely. "I brought it with me because I thought I might get some hints from the islands about here."

Kingston laughed, and blew a cloud of smoke into the air.

"They weren't cast away on the Thames, were they?" he inquired.

"Oh no, in the Pacific."

"I don't know," observed Garry with an air of deliberation—"but I almost fancy that descriptions applying to islands on the Thames might not perhaps

apply to islands in the Pacific. What do you think, Jim?"

"You never can tell," Jim answered oracularly. "I've never sailed the Pacific. But why the Pacific, Batty? It's been done to death. Why not have them cast away on a rocky island—say in the north of Scotland?"

"No, Scotland isn't sunny enough," said the talented creator of 'The Fate of Fabian.' "I prefer the Pacific."

"I've never heard any of this wonderful story," said Kingston lazily. "Why not read the chapter now, and we can judge of its merits?"

"Oh I say, Kingston, you don't know what you're letting us in for!" moaned Garry.

"Let her read it; it's great fun," said Jim, who was very fond of Batty.

"All right," rejoined Garry with resignation. "Prepare for swinging criticism, that's all."

Whereupon the literary lady took her pencil out of her mouth and began *con amore*:—

"'The sun was sinking rapidly. He was alone upon a raft, in mid-ocean, with Laura.'"

"Who was alone upon a raft, in mid-ocean, with Laura?" asked Garry the captious. "You haven't mentioned anyone, except the sun."

"Whose son?" inquired Jim.

"Nobody's son," said poor Batty. "It was Fabian."

"Oh, he was a foundling, then," rejoined Garry blandly. "I didn't think it of Fabian."

"No, he wasn't a foundling," remonstrated Batty.

"Well, you said he was nobody's son."

"But you all knew what I meant."

"No, I'm hanged if we all did. I didn't—and don't. Was he a foundling or was he not?"

"He was a castaway," put in Winifred, "and I think it's going to be real beautiful. Go on, Batty, like a dear."

"'Alone upon a raft, in mid-ocean, with Laura,'" began Batty once more.

"But stay," interrupted the irrepressible Garry—"was that quite proper? I fear not. They must have a chaperone."

"But how could they?" exclaimed Batty—"if the chaperone wasn't saved?"

"Ah, I see. There had been a chaperone, then?"

"Of course there were several on board the ship," explained poor Batty. "But when it was wrecked Fabian and Laura were the only two saved. It wouldn't have been a bit romantic if there had been more than two."

"Quite right, Batty," put in Kingston, who was looking much amused. "It is never romantic when there are more than two."

"Well, go on," said Garry, "you can put a foot-note to the effect that all the chaperones had been drowned."

"Don't you do anything of the kind, Batty," said Jim, smiling across at her affectionately. "Never mind his chaff. He couldn't write a story himself if he tried till he was blue."

"'A shark followed behind,'" proceeded Batty.

"One moment"—interposed Garry—"'a shark *followed*,' is quite sufficient. He could not follow before."

Here Jim knocked his fellow-critic's cap over his eyes, and Batty resumed,

"'Fabian's stout heart swelled, and sank to zero——'"

"Ah, poor chap, suffering from fatty degeneration, evidently," observed Kingston, with indications of inward mirth.

"'His stout heart swelled, and sank to zero?'" repeated Garry, in a tone of expostulation. "What does that mean? It sounds idiotic."

"It's a kind of idiomatic expression," explained the victim meekly. "I don't quite know what it means. But I believe it's considered artistic."

"Oh, of course if it's artistic you *don't* know what it means, nor anybody else," rejoined Garry in a resigned voice. "Go on."

"'He gazed on Laura's ivory features, his own seeming turned to marble——'"

"Marble and ivory—quite a mosaic, by Jove!" said Jim. "Bravo, Batty, that's rather neat."

"'At that instant the frail raft grated on the sand, and leaping to *terra firma*, he fell upon his knees, then drew his revolver and shot the dread retainer dead.'"

"The dread retainer?" repeated Jim, looking mystified. "Who was he?"

"It means the shark," said Batty.

"But is that what they call them in the Pacific?" asked Garry with wondering eyes. "How true that we are always learning. But why fall upon his knees? You don't want to kneel to fire a revolver."

"He was uttering prayers of thankfulness," answered Batty somewhat aggrievedly.

"Oh, beg pardon."

"'They then prepared their evening meal——'"

"The most sensible thing they've done yet, by far," put in Garry with marked approval. "I wish we were preparing ours."

"'Their evening meal—which consisted of rare fruits and fish, washed down by the pellucid juice of the grape. The evening was a blessed one, for was he not in the sole company of the one lodestar of his existence——'"

"And had he not been partaking freely of the pellucid juice of the grape?" chanted Garry in a monotonous undertone.

"'As the tropic hours wore on, the chill conviction enwrapped his soul that he was not at home, and in all probability never would be.'"

Here Garry and Jim laughed wildly, and even Brian relaxed into a smile.

But Batty went on unheeding,

"'He threw himself upon the ground and wept——'"

"After effects of the pellucid juice of the grape," muttered Garry *sotto vôce.* "It's quite usual."

"'Laura kneeled beside him, and sought to soothe his wild despair——'"

"She should have poured cold water over his head," interpolated Jim cheerfully.

"'Her silvery voice reached his wandering brain. He rose to his full height, and with the chivalrous courtesy which had characterized him since boyhood, he bent and imprinted a chaste salute upon her fair cheek——'"

"Is 'chaste salute' Pacific lingo for a kiss?" asked Jim with interest.

"It means he kissed her calmly," answered Batty the patient one.

"Oh. Were they engaged, then—or what?" inquired Garry.

"No, don't you remember?" put in Jim. "He was spoons on her, and he swallowed a diamond and it made him ill——"

"No, it was because he told a lie he was ill," corrected Garry—"don't you remember? It was his first, his only lie, and it nearly choked him."

"Oh be quiet!" exclaimed the justly exasperated author—"it's nearly finished. 'Then turning on her a weird mysterious smile——'"

"'Turning it on!'" repeated Jim. "Oh I see. It was one of these little electric businesses——"

"'A weird mysterious smile,'" went on Batty with severe emphasis, "'he walked slowly out to the furthest point where the billows churned in lonely fury. There he stood erect, motionless, like some knight of old, his arms folded on his heaving bosom —that rose and fell with the tide——'"

"But how could it rise and fall with the tide, my good Batty?" protested Garry.

"It churned," said Jim gravely. "Well, Batty, he and the billows churned all night, and in the morning——"

"Oh be quiet, please. This is the last bit. 'There he remained, in his grand unselfishness, throughout the weary night.'"

"But there was nothing grand or unselfish in standing there like a stuck pig, when he might have

gone to sleep comfortably on shore," interrupted practical Garry. "He must have been either mad or screwed."

"Had he been at the pellucid juice of the grape again?" asked Jim earnestly.

But Batty took no notice.

"'He stood there in the quivering moonlight. She saw him from her secluded couch. And her heart flew out to him.'"

"Fancy that, now," murmured Jim.

"'She knew him to be a thief. She knew that he had told a lie. She knew that he had loved countless other women——'"

"She knew that he was a blooming ass!" cut in Garry scornfully. "Or if she didn't she ought to have done."

"She knew," chimed in Jim, "that he was just showing off by standing there in the moonlight, like a harlequin under the lime-light in a pantomime."

"She knew that she would have laughed herself into fits if the fool had slipped off the rocks into the sea, and taken his weird mysterious smile and his swelled stout heart with him!" added Garry in disgusted tones. "Batty, my cherub, you've got that Fabian of yours into nothing but a snivelling muff. Put your manuscript into your pocket and do not 'irritate the animals' by reading another word, or I'll fling it into the river."

All this time Brian had not spoken a word. Dulcie resented this, as was only natural. And Kenneth's wife, divining the reason, resented it too. It did not depress her, however. It only roused in her a feeling of regret that anyone so good to look at should so belie his outward appearance.

Some way above Teddington Lock they landed on a grassy bank half-way between two of the islands. The whole party then wandered about frivolously under the trees until it should be time for tea.

Brian, after a time, approached Dulcie, who was standing beside Winifred, and said quietly,

"If not too much engaged, will you give me a few minutes, Dulcie?"

Winifred moved away at once, and was soon talking and laughing gaily with Garry and Jim, who evidently admired her immensely.

Brian was looking decidedly angry. But Dulcie was angry too. As they walked away together, their guardian angels doubtless looked after them and wept.

"I think you must have misunderstood what I said to you the other night," Brian began in a suppressed voice.

"No," she answered slowly—"I did not."

Then their eyes met and war was declared.

"You mean to set my wishes at defiance, then?" *he said* sternly.

"I mean in this matter to use my own judgment," she replied with a certain stiffening of the lips.

"Are you serious?" he asked in incredulous displeasure after a pause.

"Do I look as if I were joking?" she returned quietly.

For a moment or two he looked as if he did not quite know what to do with himself. Was it possible that she really meant to defy him?—this soft, slight-looking girl whom he had intended moulding to his will in all things. Then he said, and his voice shook in spite of himself,

"Dulcie—you do not know what you are doing——"

But she interrupted him.

"Yes," she said, "I do. I am displeasing you very much. In another minute or two you will be passionately angry, and all because I oppose your will in this one thing in which you are wrong."

Upon this Brian lost his temper; and Dulcie fully reciprocated. Whereupon a fierce battle of words ensued.

Then there was a dead silence.

Presently Dulcie said in a choked voice,

"I am disappointed in you, Brian. Every day, lately—you have shown me that you are different—quite different from the Brian I thought you were. And I have thought over it very seriously—more

seriously than I ever thought of anything before. And I have come to see that—that——"

She stopped, plucking nervously at the ribbons on her bodice.

He did not speak, but remained leaning against a tree, his face deadly white.

"I mean," she said, "that I cannot marry you."

He put up his hand with a quick gesture to his throat.

"You mean," he said after a minute, "that you no longer care for me?"

"No," she answered very low. "I'm afraid I do care for you, still."

"Then—why do you refuse to marry me?"

His voice was thick and indistinct.

Tears came into the girl's soft eyes; but she winked them away.

"Because," she answered, "I could never be happy with you. And—I could not make you happy. I have told you that you are not the man I thought you were. Neither am I the woman you thought me. I could not submit my will to yours in all things as you seem to wish me to do, because I can't help seeing that your point of view is not always right. You can be hard and unjust and cruel, when your will is thwarted. You have been all these to Garry, to Kenneth, to Kenneth's wife. You would

be all these to me too. For if you are so unreasonably tyrannical to me now over every little thing, what would you be if I were your wife, and when you thought I belonged to you, body and soul?"

He let his eyes meet hers.

"You can reason in that calm way about the breaking of our engagement," he said bitterly—"and yet you say you—love me! You never loved me."

"Perhaps I didn't," she answered, a quivering little note of regret in her voice as she looked away across the river. "Perhaps it was not love. And yet—oh Brian, I was very fond of you!"

"For God's sake stop analyzing your feelings towards me in that cold-blooded way!" he broke out fiercely.

Another silence. A swan floated noiselessly close to the river's bank, and regarded them wickedly.

Then Brian spoke again.

"You mean me to understand, then," he said in an icy voice, "that you do not wish to marry me?"

She laid her hand on his arm. But he quietly removed it.

"You are sure you mean this?" he repeated.

"Yes, Brian."

All the colour left his face.

"So be it," he answered. "Perhaps you are right. We could not possibly have been—happy."

"I don't think you will feel it very much," she answered slowly.

He did not speak. But his eyes met hers again for a moment, and hers fell.

He turned away and walked along the river's bank. The swan glided after him swiftly.

Dulcie sat down on a mossy knoll and reflected. Then she drew off her glove and steadily regarded Brian's engagement ring.

"Have I done right?" she asked herself mentally. "It has made my heart ache. But I shall get over it. It had better ache now than later, when it would be too late for aching to mend matters. But—if I had loved him as I thought I did, only a few weeks ago, I could not have given him up—no, though I had known he would have made me the most miserable woman on earth. Heigho. I don't understand myself. It's a confusing world. I shall miss his love and his attentions. I know I shall—for a time. And yet—I don't believe he ever did care for me. I don't believe he has it in him to really care for anyone but himself."

Then she half-smiled, as she thought of the deep respect and almost awe with which she had regarded the haughty Brian so—comparatively—short a time ago. It seemed pathetic.

Meanwhile Brian, feeling stunned and sick, walked

on and on, unheeding time or distance, for nearly an hour. It seemed incredible, this blow that had come to him. For his love for Dulcie Lovell was deep and passionate; and, manlike, he felt that she was twice as desirable now that he had lost her.

He did not feel angry with her, somehow. And this surprised him vaguely. For the first time in his life he was conscious that his faith in himself was somewhat shaken. Had he been wrong in this matter?—in many matters? Was it true, he wondered in a dull half-numbed kind of way, that his judgment of others was invariably cruel and hard and unjust, as she had said? Had he possibly been unreasonable, even tyrannical to her, in this very matter of Kenneth's wife?

As a matter of fact, he had been rather favourably impressed by the above-mentioned young woman. And all might have gone well, if Dulcie had given in, and allowed him to be the graciously conceding one. In which case he would doubtless, in his usually lordly way, have accorded her permission to welcome the new member of the family as a friend. But to this meek *rôle* Dulcie Lovell did not incline.

Altogether, Brian felt he was going to have a very bad time. Meanwhile, he was physically unable to face the trying tribunal of the gay family circle.

Therefore he made up his mind to go back to town alone.

"Where is Brian?" Gwendolen asked Dulcie a little later, as they were setting out the cups for tea.

"I don't know," was Dulcie's perfectly truthful reply. But the speaker happening to raise her eyes just then, met Roy Kingston's grave questioning gaze and blushed painfully.

"Pooh! don't let's wait for him," said Garry. "He looked in a proper wax about something or other when I last saw him, so I daresay his room'll be as cheerful as his company."

After tea, Dulcie and Winifred packed the baskets together.

"Is anything the matter?" whispered Winifred, affectionately. "You look real white. There, that's all. Let's go for a little turn along the river. Gwendolen and her husband are still newly-married enough to pine for each other's society, and the boys and Batty are feeding the swans with the remnants of the feast. Oh, don't call me Mrs. Kenneth. Call me Winifred. It isn't the name I would have chosen; but it's all I've got. And let me call you Dulcie."

When they were some distance from the others, Winifred stopped short.

"Now look here," she said. "Perhaps you'll think

I've no right to take any notice—but I'm certain you and Brian have had a quarrel. Isn't it so?"

Dulcie shook her head.

"No, we have not quarrelled," she answered. "But —we have decided not—to marry each other."

"But why?" exclaimed Mrs. Kenneth after a petrified pause.

"Because we don't suit each other," Dulcie answered somewhat wearily. "Please don't say anything of it—yet. No, don't blame him. I broke it off. I—couldn't help it."

"*Well!*" rejoined Winifred in a tone of real concern, "I am surprised." Then she added, "I don't know but what it serves him right. And yet—do you know I'm sorry for him, too. These self-contained disagreeable natures sometimes feel things awfully. And I think he's real fond of you. However, it'll be a lesson to him."

Dulcie said nothing.

When they got back to the boat again, the weather, to everyone's dismay, had changed, and a few drops of rain had begun to fall. Therefore our pleasure-party prepared to re-embark.

"Where's Brian?" asked Batty suddenly. "How funny of him to go away like that. And he hasn't had any tea."

Garry came over to where Dulcie was struggling with her cloak.

"I say, have you and the Boss been having a row?" he asked in an undertone. "Because if you have, we won't wait for him. Possibly he's gone back to town by train."

"I haven't seen him since before tea," she answered evasively. "But I don't think you need wait for him."

All the way home Dulcie appeared thoughtful and almost sad. Jim Venner eyed her narrowly. He guessed pretty accurately what had happened, and he felt singularly and unaccountably light-hearted.

And yet Jim Venner was one of the best-natured of lads, and not given to rejoicing at other people's misfortunes.

CHAPTER XXV.

CONFIDENCES.

" I cannot win her, for our ways divide,
And we are far apart who once were near,
Through misty eyes I saw her go."

* * * * * *

GRANDMOTHER was surprised when Brian walked into her room about six o'clock, just as she was about to have tea.

" Why, my dear, you are back early," she said.

" Yes," was the elaborately careless answer. " I'm going out again. But I just looked in to see how you were."

Grandmother was a wise woman; so she asked no questions, even though she saw at once that something untoward had happened.

" Come and have tea with me,' she said. " Angela will bring another cup."

He glanced at his watch.

"No thanks, I'm afraid I haven't time." Then he added, "Well, I will. Shall I ring?"

Grandmother watched her favourite grandson anxiously as he filled her cup and his own. And her keen old eyes saw that though his face was calm and expressionless it was exceedingly pale, and that his hand shook so that he spilled the cream in the saucers.

"The heat has knocked me all out of time," he said, laughing half nervously.

And Grandmother refrained from reminding him that the heat was merely normal, and that the thermometer had not been above seventy-five in the sun all day.

He drank his tea, poured out another cup which he left untasted, saw that Grandmother had all she wanted, and talked on various subjects with a careful indifference that did not deceive the old lady in the least.

When the tea-things had been removed, he sat there still, pulling his moustache moodily, and trifling with Grandmother's knitting-needles.

There was something rather pathetic about the usually self-possessed Brian just then; and Grandmother's loving heart went out to him tenderly.

"Must you go out again, dear?" she said. "You look as if your head ached."

"It does, rather," he answered, leaning back in his chair and covering his eyes with his hand.

"Then rest here for a little while."

He said nothing. But presently he laid his head down on Grandmother's pillow, just as he used to do when he was a little boy, and had come to her for the comfort and petting he got nowhere else. For as I have hinted, Brian was not much understood of his family, and never had been. His own fault, doubtless; but none the less dreary when he wanted sympathy, as he most assuredly did now.

For a while he remained so still that Grandmother thought he had gone to sleep. But after a time he sat up, and then the old lady saw that his eyelashes were wet.

"My boy!" she said in a tone of quick concern. "My dear boy, what is it?"

He leaned his elbows on his knees, and hid his face in his hands.

"It is nothing," he answered in a choked voice. "Only that I have been a fool—for the second time."

"Brian—I don't understand."

He got up and walked over to the window. Then he came back again.

"You will have to recant all the blessings you bestowed on Miss Lovell and me," he said with a short laugh. "They will not be required."

She put out her hand to him with a sudden startled gesture of sympathy.

"I can't talk about it," he said, turning away again. Then he added bitterly,

"It seems I am a very poor sort of fellow, Grandmother. I have heard a good many home truths from Miss Lovell—both to-day and on former occasions. If her opinion of me is what she says it is, she is very wise to have nothing more to do with me."

Grandmother said nothing, and presently he went on with a wistfulness that was almost boyish,

"Am I such a difficult fellow to get on with, do you think?"

She took his hand lovingly.

"Not to me, my boy. But—will it hurt you if I tell you that my opinion is not the generally received one?"

"On I know I needn't depend on the family circle for my character," he answered curtly. "Oh, Grandmother," he added in a desperate kind of way, after a pause—"I am deucedly miserable."

"I am surprised at Dulcie," she said with a worried look in her kind eyes. "I thought she was very fond of you."

"Now-a-days, women's hearts are subjugated by their reason, apparently," was the moody answer.

"Good-night, Grandmother. You will be asleep when I come in."

* * * * * *

Later in the evening Dulcie stole into Grandmother's room.

For the first time in that peaceful retreat she felt a sense of unrest.

"Grandmother," she said after a long silence, "I have something to tell you."

"Yes, Dulcie."

"I—I am going away." Then she added quickly, "Ah, Brian has told you."

"Yes, Brian has told me."

"Grandmother—I could not help it!"

"I am very sorry, my dear, *very* sorry. But if you do not love him, of course there is nothing more to be said."

"Grandmother, may I speak to you quite frankly?"

"Yes, my dear, surely."

"It is not that I do not love Brian," the girl went on in a low voice. "I do love him, I suppose. At least he has a curious attraction for me—always had. But something tells me that I should be miserable if I married him."

"You are very young to reason so coldly on such a subject," said Grandmother.

"Perhaps. But I have a sad example to take warning by." She paused, then continued, "My eldest sister married a man of whom Brian reminds me more and more every day—his nature I mean. He was very fond of her, I believe, and she loved him passionately. When they had been married about two years she died—died because her heart was broken. That sounds sentimental, I daresay. But it was horribly true. He was one of these cold, calm, self-righteous, strong-willed autocrats who crush everyone and everything that come in their way. And his will was iron. He was utterly pitiless, utterly callous to all suffering that bore no tangible name. My sister was the sweetest of women. But she was weak. She gave in to him in everything. But she lived in constant fear of him. Oh, what bitter stinging things I have heard him say in that cold courteous voice of his, always with a covert sneer in it. I can see poor Jessie's face now—turning from white to red, and back to white again, her dear eyes full of tears while she was trying to smile. Oh, Grandmother, how I have *hated* that man."

"But, Dulcie, are you not very hard upon Brian? He does not seem to me to answer to the description you have just given of your brother-in-law."

But Dulcie shook her head.

"I should not have promised to marry Brian," she said with a tired little sigh. "I was not sure of myself, even at first. It would be six months perhaps, of heaven, and years of—the other thing. For I should not break my heart and die, like poor Jessie. I should get hard and bitter, and our life would be awful. No, I must get over my fancy for Brian. I am sure it is only a fancy. And he won't feel it much. I don't think he does feel things much."

"You are unjust to him," said Grandmother quietly, but with a deep flush on her cheeks. "It will go very hard with him, I fear. He is neither so cold nor so heartless as you seem to think. I regret exceedingly that this has happened. And you will forgive my saying, Dulcie, that I think you are very much to blame."

"It is a pity I ever came," murmured Dulcie, almost weeping.

"It is a pity you did not know your own mind," answered Grandmother coldly.

"I will go home at once," exclaimed the girl in an excited way. "I will go home to-morrow. It will be better!"

And to this Grandmother answered nothing.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN WHICH BRIAN CHANGES HIS MIND.

"Don't waste a curse on the universe,
Remember, it lived before you.
Don't butt at the storm with your puny form
But bend and let it go o'er you.
The world will never adjust itself
To suit your whims to the letter.
Some things must go wrong your whole life long,
And the sooner you know it the better."

E. Wheeler Wilcox.

DULCIE LOVELL had left Bloomsbury Square, and gone to stay with Gwendolen for a few weeks before going home. Kenneth had taken a tiny suite of unfurnished rooms not far from Addison Road Station, and Dulcie and Gwendolen had a delightful time in helping Winifred to put them in order. Garry was in Manchester, and it was wonderful how they all missed him. To Grandmother, the want of his cheery whistle, of his step on the stairs, *made a* blank in the house almost like death.

Batty moped dismally for a week or so after his departure, then fell to work upon her story with renewed fury. It had now assumed a sanguinary style. Murders and other horrors adorned almost every other page. Clips woke up screaming upon two or three occasions after having been lulled to slumber by this harrowing record. Clips, by the way, had begun a novel of his own, a laborious production written in large text letters straggling all over the paper. It opened thus:

"Once there Was, a man, he Was very Big, he killed men And sheep Very often."

Beyond this talented opening the author had not yet advanced. Of course it was subjected to Grandmother, who pronounced it thrilling in the extreme.

The establishment of the Medlicotts was reduced considerably. A cook and housemaid now formed the sole staff of domestics. And over this "come-down" Mrs. Medlicott mourned without ceasing, and would not be comforted. But her husband was looking more cheerful than he had done for many a day. The awful weight of suspense was lifted from him, and he faced things manfully. He found Brian a much more efficient and sympathetic coadjutor than formerly, and father and son grew to understand each other in a way that drew them very close together.

"I'm sorry for the lad," Paul Medlicott said to his wife one evening when Brian had just left the room. "I fancy he's feeling that girl's throwing him over more than he shows."

"Oh, fiddlestick's end!" said Mrs. Medlicott snappishly. "A very good thing if she has thrown him over. We don't want any more foolish marriages in this family."

Paul Medlicott sighed.

"My dear, you are so impossible."

"Oh, well, I'm not the only impossible thing, I suppose. Everything is pretty well impossible now, it seems to me."

"Besides," went on her husband, "I really don't see why you should call a marriage with Miss Lovell a foolish marriage. Her father is a medical man, and that is usually considered a tolerably respectable profession."

"Oh, don't talk to me of people's professions," exclaimed Mrs. Medlicott sharply.

Meanwhile Brian, strolling in aimless fashion along the Strand, was overtaken by his brother Kenneth.

"Hallo, old man!" said the latter genially, forgetful of all past offences on his brother's part. "I was thinking of you not a minute ago. Where are you bound for?"

"Nowhere in particular," answered the other in a

dispirited voice that sounded strange from the usually self-sufficient Brian. "I'm simply working off a fit of the blues."

"Look here," said Kenneth, to whom bearing malice was unknown, "come home with me for an hour or two. The little woman's awfully cut that you've ignored her so completely. Let's bury the hatchet all round."

Now a few weeks ago Brian would have declined, curtly and uncompromisingly. But of late curtness and uncompromisingness had been less habitual with him than formerly. So he only said absently,

"Oh, I don't suppose your wife will care to see me."

Secretly surprised, Kenneth hailed a passing omnibus.

"Then you'll come. That's all right."

Brian, also surprised at his own acquiescence, followed his brother to the top of the omnibus, and relapsed into smoke and silence.

Later, when he was ushered into the presence of his sister-in-law, he was conscious of a distinct thrill of liking. If she was not pretty, she was very "taking." And he found himself thanking the family stars that she was unmistakably a lady.

As they shook hands her eyes met his with a fearless questioning look that seemed to say,

"Are you going to be friendly to me? If you are, I am very glad. Are you going to be unfriendly? Then I don't care."

But behind the fearlessness there lurked a wistfulness that seemed to say she would care.

The answering look she met in Brian's eyes seemed to satisfy her, for she said simply,

"I'm real glad to see you."

The unpretentious room—it was their only sitting-room—wore an air of home, the air that only a tasteful womanly woman can give to a room. The windows were open, and an amber-shaded lamp half-lit the summer dusk. On the small table where the lamp stood, Brian saw closely-written sheets of manuscript, and a pen not yet dry. Near one of the windows stood another table, daintily set for supper. A pot of late roses occupied the centre of this table. Their fragrance filled the room.

Kenneth's wife wore a cool holland gown, and her dark fluffy hair was tied up with rose-coloured ribbons.

"You'll have a bit of supper with us, Brian?" said Kenneth. "I daresay it isn't anything swagger, but it's sure to be nice. Winifred's a first-rate cook. Oh, I know you've had dinner, but that's a couple of hours ago. I'm late to-night."

The supper was very nice, Brian privately acknow-

ledged, well-cooked and well-served, and the gay little wife was a charming and piquante accompaniment. She talked well, and without any effort. Brian found himself listening to her somewhat high-pitched voice with combined pleasure and amusement. Kenneth threw in a few languid words now and then, but devoted himself principally to his supper.

"I had a visitor to-day," Winifred said, after persuading Brian to try her salad.

"Ah, who was that?" her husband asked.

"A relation of yours whom I haven't seen before," she answered with dancing eyes.

"No? Not my mother surely?"

"Oh, no," with a small sigh. "Not your mother. It was your aunt."

"What? Aunt Felicia?" exclaimed both men simultaneously.

Winifred nodded.

"Yes, your aunt Felicia. She stayed quite a time. And she thinks—yes, she really thinks that I am quite presentable. I am not pretty, but my manners, with the exception of my American accent, are very pleasing."

Brian laughed. Aunt Felicia's birdlike chirping good-natured voice was so faithfully reproduced. But Kenneth frowned, and muttered something under his moustache as he helped himself to salad.

"But she is an old dear, and I like her," pronounced Winifred emphatically. "She asked me to go and see her, and I shall go."

When the supper table was cleared, they sat by the open window and talked until it was so late that Brian looked at his watch in surprise.

As he walked home he told himself that he had been a fool as far as his former attitude towards his brother's wife was concerned. She was a deucedly nice little woman. And Kenneth seemed awfully happy. And—but here his own trouble all came back again.

CHAPTER XXVII.

KENNETH'S WIFE.

"A fear of something that may disturb your peace? Don't be forecasting evil, dear child, unless it is what you can guard against. Anxiety is good for nothing if we can't turn it into a defence. But there's no defence against all the things that might be."

George Eliot.

AFTER that first evening Brian often found time to go over to pay his respects to his brother's wife. Sometimes Kenneth was there and sometimes he was not. On the latter occasions Brian was wont to lounge in an easy-chair by the window, watching his sister-in-law's small lithe hands as she sewed or darned or mended, and listening half-absently to her running comments on men, manners, and morals.

Kenneth was not jealous of these *tête-à-têtes*, for he knew that in some indefinable way his wife reminded Brian of Dulcie. And there was a curious fleeting likeness. Kenneth had noticed it himself.

"You're looking real seedy," Winifred observed to

Brian quite suddenly one evening. "What's the matter? I suppose you're breaking your heart about Dulcie?"

He changed colour perceptibly, not quite sure whether he was offended or not. Finally he decided that he was not.

It was wonderful how this young woman, whom a few weeks ago he had looked upon as the most undesirable of the most undesirable, had taken his heart by storm. But she certainly had. If she had really been his sister he could hardly have been fonder of her, or more at his ease with her.

He had told her so one night, and she had answered in her frank unembarrassed fashion,

"Ah, well, that's a good thing, because I'm just awfully fond of you. But I did *hate* you at first."

Nevertheless, with all their *camaraderie*, Dulcie's name had never been mentioned between them. Therefore, when she sprung it upon him in this unexpected fashion to-night, he winced and altered his position slightly.

But after a silent minute or two he said slowly,

"I hope I'm not such a fool as to break my heart for any woman—especially one who has shown me that she doesn't care for me."

"It's for the women who don't care for them that men do break their hearts," observed Mrs. Kenneth,

who knew a thing or two. "The plums at the top of the tree are always sweeter than those on the low-hanging branches. Men are so queer."

"Ah," rejoined Brian.

"Why did you let her go?" resumed Winifred.

"Let her go?" he repeated in an indescribable tone.

"Yes."

"Suppose we don't talk about it," he said.

"I know you quarrelled about me," she went on, her voice almost soft. "I'm real sorry."

"Oh, that was only the climax," he answered bitterly. "In lieu of that something else would have turned up as a peg to hang our misunderstanding upon."

"Do you still care for her?" she ventured.

"Do you still care for Kenneth?" he said in answer.

"Why, yes—Kenneth's my husband."

"And Miss Lovell is the woman I want for my wife. And yet you ask me if I still care for her. I don't know that that's a fair question."

"Oh, we've got beyond that, you and I. However you've answered it. Let's talk of something else. I had a note from old Mrs. Medlicott to-day—your grandmother, I mean. She has asked me to go and see her. And I mean to go to-morrow."

"I am very glad, Winifred," he answered, looking genuinely pleased. "You'll be sure to get on with her. I don't believe in saints, but if ever there was one, she is."

"Ah!" she exclaimed with a long guttural inflection of dismay—"And Kenneth told me that she was such a dear! A saint! I guess I won't go then. My conversation isn't suited to saints. I prefer the other kind—you, for instance."

"My dear girl, the kind of saint you mean couldn't have lived in our family for a week. My kind of saints are interesting."

"Have you a collection of them?" she inquired, "and shall I ever be one?"

He replied in a double-barrelled negative.

And just then Kenneth came in.

"We are talking of saints," said Winifred demurely. "And Brian says I shan't ever be one."

"I should hope not indeed," returned Kenneth devoutly. "Saints are less interesting than devils, and devils are less reliable than saints. But there is a happy medium."

Next day Winifred went to see Grandmother. She would not allow Kenneth to accompany her.

"No," she said very decidedly. "If we're going to get on, we'll get on all the better alone. And if we're not going to get on, I should prefer no one *witnessing* my humiliation."

Privately Winifred thought the latter contingency the most probable. She took pains to look her nicest, however, which was not inconsiderable, and sailed into Grandmother's room with an air of dignified self-possession which told nothing of her inward nervousness. Nevertheless, the touch of *diablerie* that had sprung up in her in antagonism to the word saint—withered and died as her eyes met Grandmother's.

She came slowly nearer to the couch, and nearer, until she was quite close. Then she said,

"I am Winifred."

"My dear," said Grandmother, "I am glad to see you. Sit down, and let me look at Kenneth's wife."

"How can you speak so sweetly to me," the girl replied in a very low voice—"when I am such a terrible *mésalliance*?"

This was difficult to answer. Therefore Grandmother did not answer.

"It was good of you to write to me," Winifred went on. "I hope I shall make a good wife to Kenneth. I ought to. He is so good to me. And I do love him."

"He is very lovable," Grandmother said. "And I think, my dear," looking at her kindly, "that you are too."

"Ah, not always. I'm a little cat, at times. And

I've an awful temper. I felt real mad coming along. For Brian told me you were a saint. And I thought it more than likely you'd be stiff, and prim, and lecture me like sixty. But when I came in, and saw you lying there smiling at me, it reminded me, somehow, of—my mother——"

A queer little sob caught her breath. Then, quite suddenly, she was in Grandmother's arms.

"My dear, you must have been very lonely," whispered the old lady by and bye, somewhat unsteadily.

"I was," the girl whispered back, "I was, fearfully —until 'Gwendolen came to see me. And I had the feeling, though I never told anyone, that I had spoiled Kenneth's prospects, and that I should be a drag upon him, and—oh, and all kinds of things. But lately, I have felt better about it. I can make a little—just a very little—by my writing. And by and bye I mean to make more. And do you know that Brian often comes to see me? I am so glad, for I always felt him a dreadful rock ahead."

"I am afraid we were all rocks ahead to you, poor child," said Grandmother compassionately.

The old lady was infinitely surprised and relieved. For in spite of the various favourable reports upon her new granddaughter, she had thought of her as something probably very impossible.

Winifred stayed to tea, and the old woman and the young one talked of many things. Altogether it was a pleasant afternoon.

As Winifred was preparing to go, the door opened, and her mother-in-law came in.

"Oh, I didn't know you had a visitor, mother," said the new-comer, to whom Winifred was as yet unknown.

"It is Mrs. Kenneth," answered Grandmother quietly.

And whether it was the influence of Grandmother's room, or the influence of Winifred herself, or whether the poor lady was softened by all the troubles that had befallen her, I cannot tell, but this interview, somewhat dreaded by all, was got over very satisfactorily.

Nay more, Mrs. Medlicott announced her intention of calling upon her son's wife at an early date, and cordially invited her to come to Bloomsbury Square whenever she should have time and inclination.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN THE HALF LIGHTS.

"We keep the watch together,
Doubt and I!
In stress of midnight weather,
Doubt and I
Stand peering into darkness,
Foreboding rock and shoal,
Or shrinking in our weakness
From waves that o'er us roll."

Heine.

GWENDOLEN and Dulcie were sitting in the former's dainty drawing-room one wet October afternoon. A clear fire burned in the grate, and the room was rapidly growing dark.

"I *must* go home soon," said Dulcie after a long silence. "I have been here ever so much longer than I intended. And though I've had a delightful time, I'm quite sure Mr. Kingston would not mind seeing the last of me. You see you are quite newly-married still, and it seems so inconsiderate.

"What seems inconsiderate?" asked Gwendolen,

who was suffering from a bad cold, and wrapped up in a fleecy shawl. "Our being newly-married?"

"No. My remaining here so long."

Gwendolen laid down her sewing, and looked at her companion steadily.

"Dulcie," she said, her face and voice very earnest, "I don't want you to go away until you and Brian are friends again."

Dulcie's face flushed crimson.

"No, don't speak until I have finished," went on Gwendolen hastily. "You are making the same—the very same mistake as I did. Of course Brian isn't the dear fellow Roy is. But he really is so very much improved of late. If you had known him as he used to be, you would say so too. And this affair has cut him up awfully."

Dulcie sighed.

"I don't know what to do!" she broke out nervously. Do you suppose I don't feel it too? I shall not be happy if I marry him. I know it. But—oh, Gwen, I shall be miserable if I don't!"

After this appalling confession there was silence for a space.

Then Gwendolen murmured soothingly,

"You dear thing!"

"I'm not! I'm not!" was the hysterical answer. "I am weak, and mean-spirited, and altogether to be

despised. And remember—you are not to hint anything of what I have said to Brian. If you do I shall kill myself. And oh, Gwen, I must go home, I *must!*"

"Now, Dulcie, don't be foolish."

Upon which Dulcie began to cry.

"Listen, Dulcie. Do you care for Brian?"

"Yes."

"Then why, in the name of goodness, make him and yourself miserable for a ridiculous fad? Look here. You say he is strong-willed, and unjust and cruel. Strong-willed he may be. Most men are, who are worth anything. But unjust and cruel he is not. And I believe marriage would improve him wonderfully. Why, I know at least three girls who would jump at him. Oh, you needn't stick up your chin like that."

"It is not so very long ago," said Dulcie with a transient gleam of resentment in her dark eyes—"since you spoke of him very differently."

"Oh, very likely. It is not so very long ago since you lectured me in a fashion that had nothing to say to the way you are behaving now. Suppose he is masterful and overbearing, as you call it? Suppose he does want to be obeyed? Perhaps I have old-fashioned notions, but it seems to me that if a woman cares for a man, she will be very pleased to

be ruled by him, to a certain extent. Yes, I know quite well I thought differently once. But I was a little fool. And what is the use of having opinions, if one can't change them? Oh, for Heaven's sake don't talk to me of what is due to women. I am sick—deadly, deadly *sick*—of the pushing, loud, assertive, unsexed New Woman, who thinks herself superior to man and equal to the Almighty. Heaven help the man who marries her, say I! If a woman is happy enough to get the chance of marrying the man she loves best in the world, let her do it and thank God. It doesn't invariably happen that she does get the chance."

"But I don't want to be a new woman," remonstrated Dulcie.

"Oh, that's what it will end in," answered Gwendolen in an exasperated kind of way. "Jane Wandsworth was here to-day while you were out, and that's what she's come to, since her affair with Joe Carrol. It's always the disappointed women who become new, I've observed. Now, mark my words, Dulcie, it would just serve you right if Brian got over his fancy for you and fell in love with somebody else. It would, really. Oh, it's all very well to cry."

Here Dulcie beat an undignified retreat.

In the solitude of her room she sat down and thought deeply. She had been distinctly unhappy of

late. That was indisputable. Possibly—though not certainly—Brian had also been unhappy. She had only seen him twice since that day on the river, upon both of which occasions he had appeared much as usual. And—such is the perversity of human nature, especially female human nature—he had never seemed to her so likeable.

She missed him in her life, missed what she had condemned in him, as well as what she had admired. She had tried not to think of him, and in consequence, she thought of him constantly.

She wanted him. That was the plain English of it. She wanted him. And she could not do without him. This was what her heart kept clamouring, as she sat there in the dark. And very likely he would get to care for someone else, as Gwendolen had said. And it was a miserable world. And everybody was painfully unsatisfactory.

After a few more tears she bathed her eyes, smoothed her hair, and went down to supper, for she had heard Kingston come in some time ago.

She found Gwendolen in a state of keen excitement.

"Dulcie!" she exclaimed as the latter came softly in, hoping her pink eyelids might escape notice—"what do you think has happened? The most romantic extraordinary thing——"

"Suppose we go in to supper," put in Roy, smiling at his wife affectionately. "And then we can impart the wonderful news to Miss Lovell by degrees."

When they were seated at table Dulcie said,

"Now, may I hear the romantic episode?"

"It really is the most surprising thing, out of a book, I ever heard of," declared Gwendolen.

"But what is it?" asked Dulcie with pardonable impatience.

"I will tell you," said Kingston, "as Gwendolen seems too much impressed to deal in anything but generalities. It seems that Kenneth's wife——"

"The dear girl!"—interrupted Gwendolen—"I always knew she would turn out to be somebody!"

"That Kenneth's wife," continued her husband with an indulgent smile, "has come into a fortune of two thousand a year—or rather is about to come into it. There is some chance of the will being contested. But it is almost certain it will come out all right."

"How delightfully unexpected," exclaimed Dulcie, after an incredulous pause. "But I don't understand. How could she—I mean, who left it to her?"

"An elderly cousin who has just died in America," said Kingston.

"I had no idea she had rich relations," mused Gwendolen. "I never heard her speak of them. Did you, Dulcie?"

"I think I have heard her speak of a cousin of her mother's," began Dulcie doubtfully.

"Oh yes, of course, I remember. She said he was a frightful old person, and that he threatened her with the most unheard-of things, because after her father's death she refused to leave her mother, and to let this cousin adopt her—or marry her—I forget which."

"Well, it is very wonderful," observed Roy, with an odd smile. "Happily, she has already been welcomed by us all as one of the family."

A night or two later Brian came in, looking grave and pale.

"Anything the matter?" asked Kingston quickly.

"Well, yes," the other answered. "Kenneth's laid up with pleurisy. I've just come from there."

"Oh, I am grieved!" exclaimed Gwendolen in deep concern. "I thought he looked unlike himself the other night. Is he very ill, Brian? And has Winifred anyone with her?"

"He is pretty bad," was the evasive answer. "And Winifred hasn't a soul with her, except the servant, and she's a little fool. My mother's laid up, or I would have persuaded her to go. I suppose you couldn't be with Winifred for a time, Gwendolen?" he went on anxiously. "She ought to have someone, for Kenneth won't hear of having a nurse. He got quite excited when I suggested it."

"No, Gwendolen, you cannot possibly go," said Kingston in a very decided voice. "You must not think of it, with that cold."

"Let me go," put in Dulcie impulsively. "I should like to. I am very strong, and I am a capital nurse."

Brian turned to her with quick, grateful eyes. "That is good of you," he said. "Could you come now, at once?"

"Yes, quite easily. You won't mind, will you, Gwendolen?"

"Mind, my dear! I think it's too sweet of you to be willing to rush off all in a minute like that. You can take a hand-bag for to-night, and I'll send or bring anything else you may want, to-morrow."

Dulcie left the room, and in an incredibly short space of time came back again, all ready to start.

"Are you wrapped up enough?" asked Brian. "There is a cold wind, and this room is very warm."

His tone was not in the least loverlike. It was kind enough, but somewhat preoccupied. The girl noted this with a quick pang.

"Yes, I am well wrapped up," she answered. "My cloak is lined with fur."

"It was very good of you to come on such short notice," said Brian when they were fairly in the street.

"Oh I am glad to be of use," she answered.

"Your voice sounds tired," he said. "Have you been well?"

"Yes, I think so."

"I am very anxious about Kenneth," he went on. "I didn't say much to Gwendolen, in case of alarming her. But the doctor has been there twice to-day, and seems to think it is rather a serious case."

Neither spoke again until they reached their destination. Kenneth was much the same, Winifred said, meeting them at the door of the sitting-room. She looked pale and anxious, but smiled in pleased welcome to Dulcie, whom she did not seem at all surprised to see.

"It was good of you to come," she said earnestly. "It was real good of you."

"Is there anything I can do before I go?" asked Brian. "Did they send the medicines and things?"

"Yes, thank you. How good you are, Brian. I shall never be able to thank you enough."

"Just take care of yourself," he answered, taking her hand affectionately. "I'll look in first thing in the morning. I do wish you would let me sit up with Kenneth to-night."

"No," she said quickly. "I shall sit up with him myself."

"My dear girl, you don't look fit for it," he remonstrated.

"I'm going to do it, anyway," she answered obstinately.

During this brief colloquy Dulcie felt unaccountably "out of it." She was surprised at the evident friendship, almost affection, between those two.

And was she jealous—ever so little?

"It is not like me to be jealous," she argued mentally and fiercely. "Besides, it is absurd. Kenneth's wife! What can I be thinking of? Oh! *surely* he is not going to kiss her!"

But as a matter of fact Brian did just then stoop down and kiss his trembling little sister-in-law. A brotherly friendly kiss that no one need have objected to; but it sent poor Dulcie's heart into her mouth, so that she could hardly reply to her *ci-devant* lover's good-night.

But when he had gone she resolutely put herself into the background, and prepared to be Winifred's right hand in all things.

* * * * * * *

The days that followed were very anxious ones. Kenneth was very ill, and with that almost childlike selfishness which is exhibited by most masculine

patients, refused to be attended to or waited upon by anyone but his wife. So that Dulcie's chief work lay in looking after Winifred, seeing that her meals and Kenneth's were carefully prepared, and superintending the little household generally. Gwendolen, who came every day, pronounced her a model housekeeper.

Brian came twice a day—first thing in the mornings before he went to the city, and again in the evenings.

One evening, it was a Saturday, he found Winifred looking so utterly worn out that he insisted on sitting up with Kenneth himself, for that night at least, and somewhat arbitrarily ordered the anxious little wife to go to bed and at least try to get some sleep. This, however, she was most unwilling to do.

"No, no," she said almost fretfully, "I can't go to bed. I must see that Kenneth has his soup. He likes me to give it to him. And he is to have arrowroot with wine in it every four hours."

"But Brian will give it to him," Dulcie answered in her tender soothing voice.

"Oh, Brian is a dear. But he can't make arrowroot. How should he?"

"But I will do it. I am not a bit tired or sleepy. And I can make arrowroot very nicely. You know the doctor said he was decidedly better

to-day, so you can take a little sleep with an easy mind."

So after a little more resistance, Winifred, who was indeed utterly done up, consented to retire to the small room at the top of the house which had been prepared for Dulcie, and at least try to go to sleep.

When Dulcie had seen the tired dark eyes close at last in heavy exhausted slumber, she crept noiselessly downstairs, and knocked at the door of the sick-room to see if she could do anything there. But finding that Kenneth too had fallen asleep, and that Brian had all he wanted, she made up the sitting-room fire softly, collected all that might be required during the night, and put the soup to keep warm on the hob. Then she drew a rocking-chair close to the fire, and prepared to pass the long hours with a book and her own thoughts.

The sick-room communicated with the sitting-room by folding doors, and now and again she could hear Brian moving about, or soothing Kenneth with a quiet word or two when he fretted or moaned in his sleep.

Dulcie rocked monotonously backwards and forwards, with a curious dreamy satisfaction in the knowledge that all the household slept save Brian and herself. Of course he was not thinking of her.

But still—but still—A drowsy feeling came over her; the book slid from her lap to the floor.

Then she roused to wakefulness with a start, to find Brian looking down at her gravely, almost tenderly, with an expression in his eyes she had never seen there before. She started up.

"Is it time for the arrowroot?" she said confusedly.

"I have just given it to him," he said, smiling at her vexed face. "He has fallen asleep again."

"I am so provoked with myself," she answered, rubbing her still sleepy eyes. "I don't think I could really have been asleep. And yet I suppose I must have been."

"Oh it's all right," he said. "You left everything where I could get it. And I'm sure you must be awfully tired."

"No I am not," she answered with a tremor in her voice, partly because she really was tired, and partly because the unwonted kindness in his voice upset her. During all these past days he had hardly spoken to her at all.

"Has Winifred had any sleep?" he asked.

"She was sleeping when I left her."

"Ah, that is well. Kenneth asked for you when he last woke up. But you looked so weary in your sleep I didn't like to disturb you."

Tears of mortification came into her eyes.

"I am indeed a useful kind of person," she said half bitterly.

"You are a very useful kind of person," he answered with grave emphasis. "Winifred could not have managed without you."

He went back into the sick-room, and Dulcie sat over the fire, conscious that her heart was aching very badly, and hardly conscious why. She cried a little, quite softly, as she sat there in the flickering firelight, and felt strangely desolate. And she longed for the dear home faces. She wanted to creep into her mother's arms, and sob out her trouble and tiredness in that loving refuge that had never failed her. It seemed so long, so very long, since she left them all. And yet it was just a year. Only a year since this new element in her life had come, and had hurt her so sorely.

"They care for me!" she murmured wistfully. "They love me, and don't get tired of me."

This was somewhat enigmatical, as well as a trifle unreasonable in regard to her present surroundings. But we are apt to be enigmatical and unreasonable, not to say unjust, in our moments of depression. For this is human nature. And poor Dulcie was lamentably human.

When Brian came in a couple of hours or so later,

he saw very well that she had been crying, and his voice and eyes were very gentle.

"I think he seems better," he said as he took the little tray with the soup. "His skin is much cooler, and I fancy his voice sounds stronger."

Nevertheless, it was a very weak voice that came from the inner room just then.

"Is that Dulcie?" it said. "Let her come in—just for a minute or two."

She went in, and waited, as he asked her, while he finished his soup. Brian had propped him up with pillows, and Dulcie noted the look of affection that passed between the brothers as the invalid laid his hand on Brian's and said unsteadily,

"What we should have done without you, old fellow, I don't know."

"What you would have done without Dulcie, you mean," the other answered with a brief smile. "Now, you are not to talk. I want Winifred to be rewarded for her obedience in going to bed by finding you better in the morning."

Dulcie went into the other room again. Did Brian know he had called her Dulcie? It was the first time since the breaking of their engagement. I suppose she was a foolish young woman. But this comparatively trivial circumstance made her feel curiously happy.

We are such poor creatures, we mortals. It takes such a trifle to lift us up, such a trifle to cast us down.

> "Oh, the little more, and how much it is!
> And the little less, and what worlds away!
> How a sound shall quicken content to bliss,
> Or a breath suspend the blood's best play,
> And life be a proof of this!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

ONCE AGAIN!

"Come, let us shake hands and say good-bye!
(There is no need to cry:
All the old wounds are healed: these are but scars).
We loved, or thought we loved. 'Tis all the same."

* * * * * *

"The heart shall find its Eden yet."

* * * * * *

IT was some weeks later. It was Saturday evening. And it was also Grandmother's birthday.

Her room seemed overflowing with the family. All were there, every one. Not even Garry was missing, for he had arrived the evening before, having unexpectedly obtained what he called "forty-eight hours off."

Kenneth and Winifred were there, the former almost his languid self again, though pale and thin; Kingston and Gwendolen; Dulcie; even Jim Venner, who if not in the family, was certainly of it. Batty (for a wonder with no manuscript under

her arm) and Clips, the proud proprietor of an imp-like kitten, occupied the hearth-rug. Mr. and Mrs. Medlicott and Brian completed the party, the latter sitting near Winifred, who was playing soft odd little airs on the piano. Winifred was looking very happy and pleased; for the morning's post had brought her the welcome news that the question of her inheritance was now settled indisputably.

Grandmother was surrounded by birthday gifts of the most various kinds and descriptions. Perhaps Clips' was the most unique, for it consisted of a live frog imprisoned in a wide-mouthed pickle-bottle. It had been the joy of his heart for several weeks, and in spite of the remonstrances of his family, had seemed a fitting and sacrificial gift for his beloved Grandmother. She would not have laughed at it for worlds, and said it was very, very kind of Clips. Which, considering his own affection for the thing, it really was.

Dulcie was looking depressed and unlike herself. She was now staying with Kenneth and Winifred. They declared she had worn herself out in their behalf, and should not be permitted to leave them until she looked much plumper and rosier than she was doing now. She was sitting apart from the others, leaning back in her chair with a dispirited look that made Brian, who was watching her, feel

sorry for her, and wonder what was the cause of it. As he questioned this thought he met Grandmother's eyes.

Grandmother's eyes were very expressive; and she rested them for a half a minute on Brian, and then turned them slowly on Dulcie.

Brian was conscious of an acceleration of heart-beats. He knew quite well what Grandmother's look meant. But he had quite the average amount of pride, and the prospect of being found wanting a second time did not commend itself to him.

"It's more than a year since Miss Lovell came," observed Batty, apropos of nothing.

"Yes, and she never got married to Brian after all!" supplemented Clips with an injured air.

Dulcie blushed a cruel crimson, and Brian looked savage.

"Sing to us, Winifred," put in Gwendolen hastily. "Sing that dear little thing you sang the other night."

"Yes, I will," acquiesced Winifred. "I love it myself."

She played a quaint, lulling, rocking accompaniment, and sang in her clear penetrating voice:

"Even for you I shall not weep,
When I, so tired, at last am dead;
Nor turn and sorrow in my sleep,
Though you should linger overhead.

"Even of you I shall not dream,
Beneath the waving grave-yard grass,
One with the soul of wind and stream,
I shall not hear you if you pass.

"Even for you I would not wake;
Too bitter were the tears I knew,
Too dark the road I needs must take,
The road that winds away from you."

As her voice ceased there was a silence, broken by the door closing softly after Dulcie.

Then Garry made a sudden swoop upon Winifred.

"My dear girl," he said severely, "you will kindly not sing songs that make a fellow long to go and bury himself in the coal-cellar. It is both immoral and unpleasant. For the love of everything wholesome, sing us 'Tommy Atkins.'"

"Oh, Garry!" broke in Batty reproachfully, "the other is a lovely song. It makes me ache all over!"

"I daresay," he answered. "But I don't want to ache all over. You are getting too romantic for anything. How's that sentimental ass, Fabian, by the way?"

"Torn up!" was the brief and tragic answer.

"Torn up? What! Did wild beasts get him after all?"

"No. I tore him up. It was silly. I would have

been ashamed to see it in print. I'm not going to write any more for a year!"

"Oh, Batty, do you mean to say you've really destroyed your story?" exclaimed Winifred in real concern.

But Garry and Jim flew towards the abdicating author, and seizing a hand each, shook them violently and continuously.

"Behold, what inconceivable wisdom in one so young and fair!" exclaimed Garry.

"All hail!—Spartan girl!" supplemented Jim.

"Let us toast her in the 'pellucid juice of the grape,'" chanted Garry.

"And compose in her honour glorious anthems of praise!" chimed in Jim.

"I always said you might have brains," went on Garry, still working poor Batty's right hand up and down. "But now I'm sure of it."

"You've shown more brains and good sense than if you'd written fifty novels," added Jim enthusiastically. "And your family shall rise up and call you blessed!"

"Oh be quiet!" exclaimed the victim, pulling her hands away with as near an approach to temper as her nature afforded.

"What an amount of superfluous energy you two fellows do possess!" murmured Kenneth. "It's awfully exciting to be in the same room with you."

"It's the relief!" observed Garry, falling into the nearest chair—"the unspeakable relief of being let off art criticism. For Fabian was getting awfully artistic. Wasn't he, Batty? I couldn't understand what he was driving at latterly. He was so obscure."

But Batty had taken refuge with Grandmother, and would not be cajoled from that safe retreat.

Meanwhile Dulcie was sitting in the dismantled schoolroom, now a kind of nondescript apartment used principally as a refuge for decrepit and incapacitated furniture. There was no fire, of course. And the one dim gas jet she had lit seemed to accentuate the general dreariness.

Not much more than a year, as Batty had just said, since she first saw that room. Then, as she thought of Clips' addenda, her cheeks crimsoned again. No, Brian and she had not married after all.

She remembered the night of the dance, when Brian had come home unexpectedly, and when he and she had had supper in this very room, and had sat by the fire afterwards. She remembered hundreds of things. They came crowding upon her, and weighed down her heart as if it must break. All these things seemed so far away, as impossible as if they had never been.

And then this foolish and weak-minded young

woman laid down her head on her arms and cried very bitterly.

And in the midst of her crying the door opened and Brian himself came in, as you have of course foreseen he would.

Dulcie rose quickly, turned her back upon him, and began to search diligently in the shelves of the bookcase, trying to wink her eyes dry the while.

Brian stood with his back to the empty fireplace, and waited.

Dulcie selected a book and turned over its pages, which showed blurred and indistinct through her tear-wet lashes. It chanced to be a treatise on Poor Law Reform. It might have been Arabic, for all she was aware.

Brian watched her in silence for a minute; then he said quietly,

"Are you very much occupied, or may I speak to you for a little?"

"I—I am reading," she answered confusedly.

He came behind her, and took the book gently from her hand.

"It is not vitally interesting, is it?" he said. "Listen to me for a few minutes instead." He paused, then went on,

"I have noticed very often lately, that my presence is annoying and embarrassing to you. But I hope

you have seen that I could not very well help it. During Kenneth's illness I had to be there; and of course there are times when we must meet. But I am going over to Belgium for a week or so on business, and perhaps——"

"And perhaps by the time you come back I shall have gone, you mean?" the girl flashed out suddenly. "You are quite right. I shall certainly have gone. I do not intend to take advantage of the hospitality of your family indefinitely. I—I am very glad you are going. I—I hope you will have a pleasant journey."

He bowed without speaking. But after a pause he said,

"Then I suppose I shall not see you again—after to-night."

"No," she answered with a catch in her voice—"not after to-night."

"Therefore," he went on with a faint smile—"perhaps you will forgive me my shortcomings. May we not part friends? You have not been very kind to me of late. And I don't think I have been altogether to blame."

"No, no," she said, turning to him with eyes drowned anew—"it has all been my fault—from the very beginning. I want to tell you that—I want to tell you—oh, Brian! how can you be so cruel to me?"

To say that Brian was amazed would be somewhat inadequate. But he concealed it admirably, and only changed colour to a trifling extent as he repeated in a low voice,

"*I* cruel to you, Dulcie? I think you know that it has been rather the other way."

She had come quite close to him.

"Forgive me!" she murmured. "Forgive me!"

"I have forgiven you," he said unsteadily.

"Then—then kiss me, Brian! I am so very, very miserable."

"*Dulcie!*"

Then a lapse of some silent minutes.

It was exceedingly cold in the schoolroom. But presumably neither Dulcie nor Brian were materially inconvenienced thereby, for they remained there for a very considerable time.

It was she who first became alive to the hour, which was nearly eleven.

"Oh, Brian!" she exclaimed in dismay, "what will Winifred and Kenneth think? They intended going home quite early."

"If they have gone, we will follow in a hansom," said Brian consolingly.

And indeed when some minutes later they returned to Grandmother's room, they found that not only Winifred and Kenneth had gone, but Gwendolen and Kingston also.

Grandmother was alone, the firelight shining on her quiet face and hands. A tender smile came into her sweet old eyes as she looked at the two truants.

Just a glance, and then she held out both her hands to them. The old, old story! She knew it so well.

"Grandmother," said Brian, bending down to kiss her, "Dulcie and I have come to tell you that we have forgiven each other."

* * * * * * *

When they had left her, Grandmother lay quite still for some time. Her lips moved softly, and a brief mist came over her eyes.

Outside, the snow fell softly, noiselessly. It fell over a far-away grave that Grandmother knew. An old, old grave, where many beautiful and relinquished hopes, as well as one loving heart lay buried.

And Grandmother's faith whispered that the hopes and the heart would be hers again, in that "better country" to which she was so near—so very, very near.

THE END.

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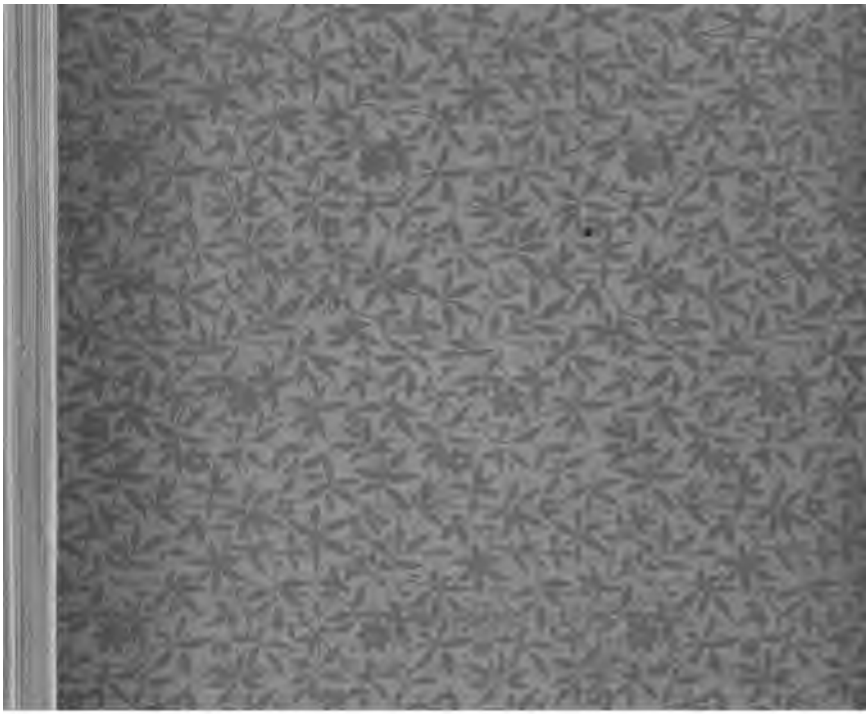

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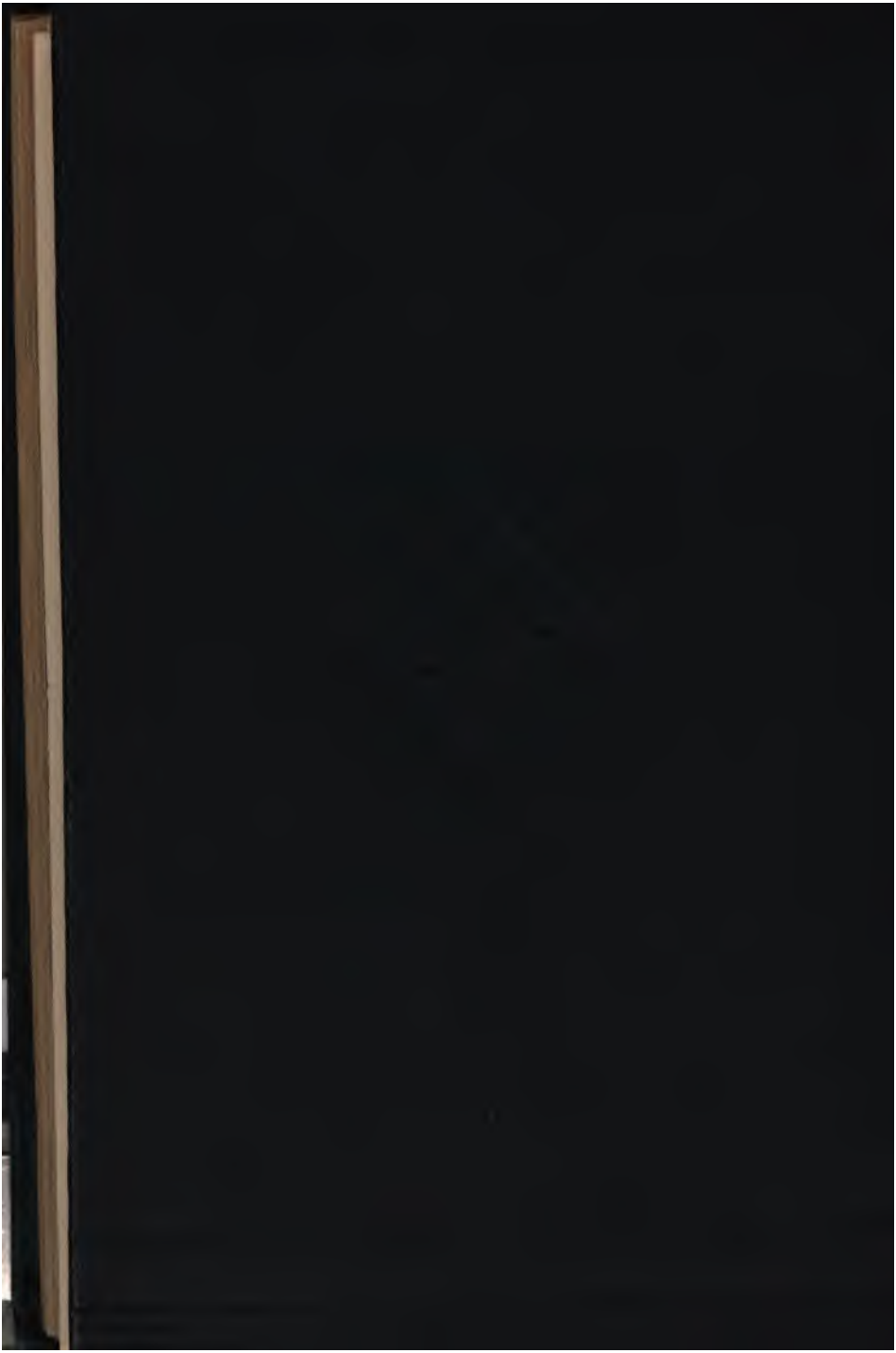
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